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THE NEW YORKER

JUNE 26, 2023

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THE NEW YORKER

JUNE 26, 2023

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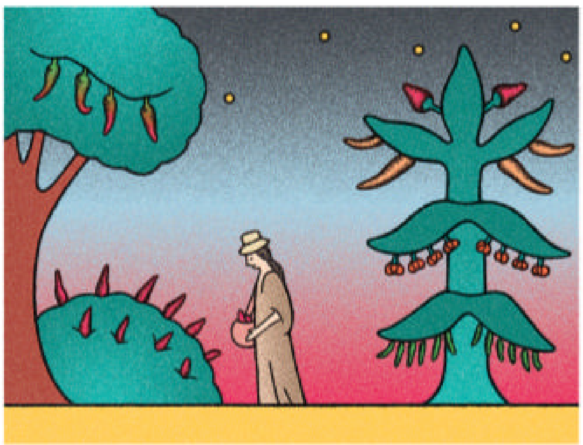

ELEMENTS

Climate change is threatening crops around the world. Clarissa Wei writes about a quest to save chili peppers.

LETTER FROM EUROPE

A debate in France belies the notion that there is a secret to raising kids *à la française*, Lauren Collins writes.

LEFT: LINDA MERAD; RIGHT: KIMBERLY ELLIOTT

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THE MAIL

SIMON'S FAITH

Amanda Petrusich writes thoughtfully about Paul Simon's music, recognizing the influences of Christian hymns, mystical theology, Brazilian candomblé, and American baseball (A Critic at Large, June 5th). She notes his spiritual seeking and his "expansive, open-ended notion of God." It's important also to understand the mostly secular Jewish culture in which Paul, Art Garfunkel, and their friends grew up. Paul was my neighbor, classmate, and crush, from elementary school through high school, in Queens. Whether or not we really believed in a personified deity, my peers and I identified as Jewish. Our families were not strictly observant, but we grew up hearing and chanting traditional Biblical texts, prayers, and psalms, in the local synagogue on Sabbath or around the dinner table on holidays. And we could never forget that although we were growing up "safe" in America, six million Jews—including some of our own relatives—had been murdered by the Nazis in Europe.

Now that we're in our eighties, we're getting nervous about mortality. Grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles have died, as have many of our friends and contemporaries. Even if we are still in good health, we know it can't last forever. Death is always on our minds. Whatever sustains us is good, and may be as close to Heaven as we're likely to get.

Jacqueline Lapidus
Brighton, Mass.

SONG AS OLD AS TIME

I was fascinated by John Seabrook's article about the copyright lawsuit concerning Ed Sheeran ("The Trials of Ed Sheeran," June 5th). As a songwriter and a music instructor, I have always told my students over the years that there is only one song, and it has been rewritten a million times. It's pretty dang hard to come up with something completely different when there is so much comfort in familiarity. People say, "I know what I like and I don't like that," when what they really mean to say is "I like what I know and I don't know that." So, we give them what they know. I'm not saying that Sheeran or anyone else is doing it intentionally, but familiarity feels right.

Music publishers used to tell me to write something just like the hit of the moment. Record companies have always followed a hit with another song that sounds exactly the same. The music business is a pit in which only a handful of people ever make any money. I guess trying to protect what money there is is simply part of the game.

Lewis Mock
Colorado Springs, Colo.

HEART AND SOUL

Alex Ross and I did not attend the same performance of Mahler's Ninth Symphony, conducted by Gustavo Dudamel—he went on May 20th, I went on the 21st (Musical Events, June 5th). Perhaps that explains why our responses were dramatically different. I agree with Ross that Dudamel is not Bernstein. And the audience shouldn't compare him with Bernstein but, rather, with what preceded Dudamel at the Philharmonic. By those terms, what I saw was passion and youth. There was such excitement in the air during the sold-out performance. Dudamel was clearly in synch with the orchestra. The principal horn (borrowed from Berlin) was masterly; the timpanist played with total concentration and joy. All the many soloists performed with real vigor. The standing ovation was complemented by the multiple hugs exchanged between Dudamel and the orchestra members.

Stephen T. Schreiber
Princeton, N.J.

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JUNE 21 – 27, 2023

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

In 2019, Kenny Leon directed a free Shakespeare in the Park production of "Much Ado About Nothing," set in the suburbs of Atlanta. One pandemic later, he returns to the Delacorte with another update on a classic, and, unsurprisingly, it's darker fare. **"Hamlet"** (in previews, opening June 28) stars Ato Blankson-Wood (above) as a bereaved son trying to get a handle on his grief. In a departure for the Public, there will be no second major show; instead, the sixty-one-year-old theatre will close for modernizing upgrades.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT ROSSI

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

THE THEATRE

The Comeuppance

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's unsettlingly up-to-the-moment new play, directed, with loving attention, by Eric Ting, is a mostly realistic portrayal of four high-school friends who have gathered to "pre-game" their (post-COVID) twenty-year high-school reunion in the D.C.-adjacent precincts of Maryland. Emilio (Caleb Eberhardt) is an artist of growing renown "based" in Berlin; Ursula (Brittany Bradford) has gone blind in one eye, a result of diabetes; Caitlin (Susannah Flood) has married a much older man, a police officer who is getting sucked into the churn of right-wing conspiracy theories; and Kristina (Shannon Tyo) is a doctor with "so many . . . fucking kids," who has started to rely too much on alcohol to calm her anxieties. Throughout the play, Death takes turns inhabiting each actor, speaking in revealing monologues that, despite a constant Catskills-esque patter of dark jokes about the daily vagaries and indignities of his work, often sound like a companionate essay by Jacobs-Jenkins. It's a way of entering his own play, admitting his lordship over its characters and his interest in the pressures that they share, which are also his to bear, and all of ours.—*Vinson Cunningham (Reviewed in our issue of 6/19/23.) (Pershing Square Signature Center; through July 9.)*

Wet Brain

Love—especially as it operates in families, where it's not so easily left behind—can be a real piece of work. Take the setup of "Wet Brain," the intermittently painful, often brilliant new play by John J. Caswell, Jr., directed by Dustin Wills. Joe (Julio Monge) seems like the father from Hell: a vicious, long-time alcoholic, who can now barely walk, talk, or keep from vomiting. Still, his adult children—Angelina (Ceci Fernandez), Ron (Frankie J. Alvarez), and Ricky (Arturo Luís Soria)—are simply chained to him by familial bonds. The siblings feel obligated to tend to Joe, and they continually invoke their dead mother, Mona (Florencia Lozano), even though they wince whenever she comes up. The story is harrowing, heartening, and, eventually, surrealistic in a manner that I've never seen achieved onstage. Sometimes a touch of sci-fi is the only way to explain the workings of lifelong dysfunction.—*V.C. (Playwrights Horizons; through July 2.)*

DANCE

American Ballet Theatre

The company returns to the Metropolitan Opera House for its yearly residency, which, owing to the Met's expanding schedule, has been reduced to four ballets in four and a half weeks. The first slot is taken up by Christopher Wheeldon's expansive new piece "Like Water for Chocolate" (June 22-July 1), a co-production with the Royal Ballet of London, based on Laura Esquivel's magical-realist novel of the same name. It's a multigenerational love story, set in early-twentieth-century Mexico, about thwarted passion. The music, by Joby Talbot, is propulsive; the designs, by Bob Crowley, are at once grand and spare. Of several casts, one of the most intriguing is led by the young and expressive SunMi Park, who was recently promoted to soloist, and Daniel Camargo, an extraordinary actor-dancer who joined A.B.T. last year. The company follows with the usual parade of big, familiar dramas: "Giselle" (July 3-8), "Swan Lake" (July 10-15), and, finally, "Romeo and Juliet" (July 18-22).—*Marina Harss (Metropolitan Opera House; through July 22.)*

"Illinois"

The choreographer Justin Peck is not known for storytelling; his dances, tightly constructed and musically sensitive, dwell in the realm of geometry, infused with feeling but without the arc of a story line. (He dipped his toe into narrative just once, in 2016, with the rather labored "The Most Incredible Thing.") But Peck's Broadway and film choreography has brought him closer to stories. "Illinois," a new music-theatre work directed and choreographed by Peck and created in collaboration with the playwright Jackie Sibblies Drury, is the next step. The piece, inspired by the singer-songwriter Sufjan Stevens's 2005 album—arranged for a small musical ensemble by Timo Andres—explores aspects of the American experience and the American landscape, both very Peckian themes.—*M.H. (Fisher Center at Bard, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.; June 23-July 2.)*

"SW!NG OUT"

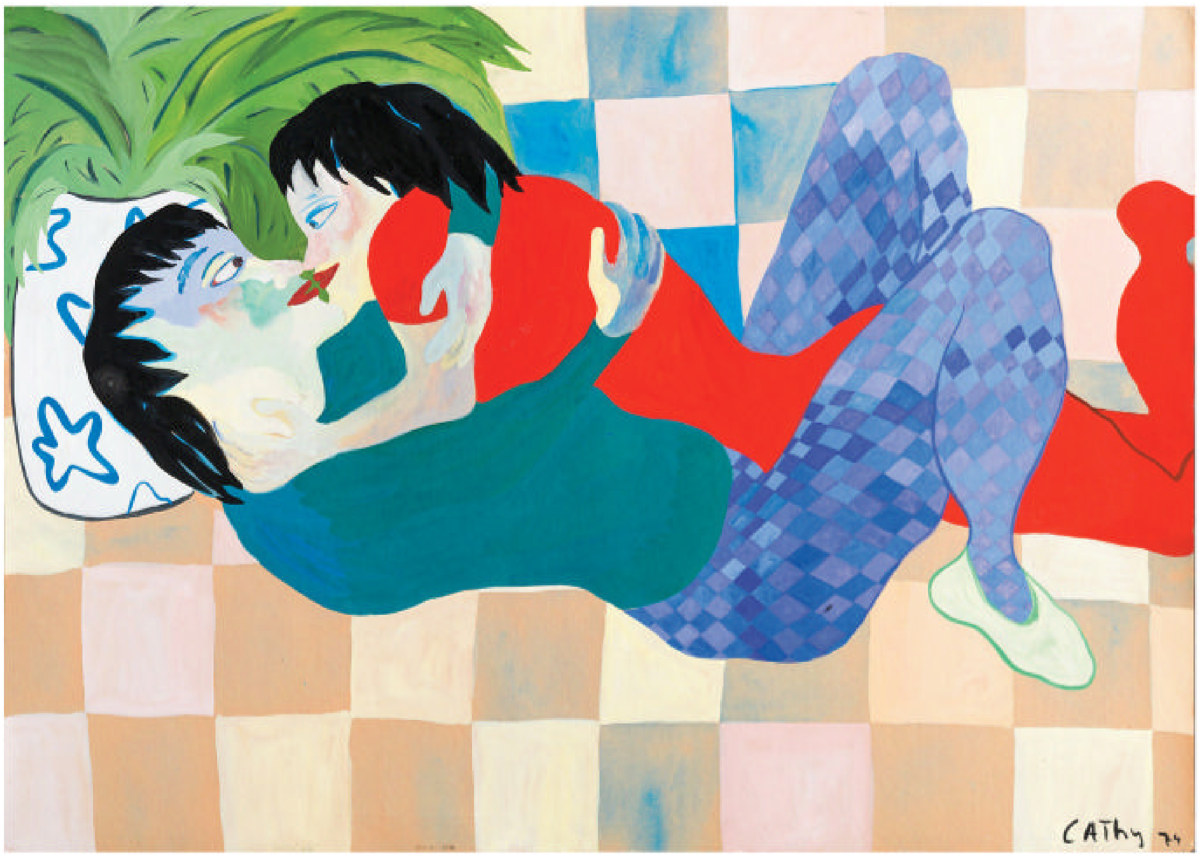
One of the most enjoyable shows of 2021 returns to the Joyce. Swing dance, born in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, is often approached as period-costume historical, but "SW!NG OUT" treats the Lindy as alive and contemporary. A crackerjack team, led by Caleb Teicher and buoyed by the Eyal Vilner Big Band, strikes a balance between past and present, variety show and social dance. Sometimes spinning at wild velocities, the affable dancers blur the borders between improvisation and choreography, and leader and follower. After the show, the band keeps playing, and audience members can swing onstage.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; June 20-July 2.)*

OFF BROADWAY

ILLUSTRATION BY FANNY BLANC

Craig Lucas and Adam Guettel, the book-and-music team behind "The Light in the Piazza," return with their first collaboration in eighteen years. The result, a musical based on J. P. Miller's 1958 teleplay turned film, justifies the wait. **"Days of Wine and Roses"** centers on a love triangle involving a public-relations man (Brian d'Arcy James), a secretary at the same company (Kelli O'Hara), and booze. Initially, she doesn't "much see the point" of alcohol, preferring chocolate, so he orders her a brandy Alexander, setting in motion the transformation of a high-minded ingénue into a housewife too drunk to play hide-and-seek with their daughter. Michael Greif nimbly directs this world première, for Atlantic Theatre Company (produced in arrangement with Warner Bros. Theatre Ventures). Guettel's alternately jazzy and operatic score never stoops to sentimentality, nor do the bravura performances, even while plumbing the depths of self-destructiveness.—*Dan Stahl*

AT THE GALLERIES



As the practices of art and care become ever more entwined, consider the model put forth by **“Cathy Josefowitz: Forever Young”** (at Hauser & Wirth, 69th Street, through July 22), a selection of paintings, drawings, and performance videos by an artist and seeker largely unknown in her lifetime. The New York-born, Swiss-reared Josefowitz (1956-2014) rarely spoke about the why of her work, perhaps because she was devoted to the expression of spirit, and to psychic healing, more than she was to creating meaning. A painful childhood placed her at odds with her own body. (“I was crippled by the image of myself,” she once wrote.) Searching for a panacea, she studied art, theatre, and the philosophies of Jiddu Krishnamurti and Osho, as well as dance, under the Judson luminary Steve Paxton. Movement became central to her art, visible in the ebullient, sensuous physicality of her figures. The amorous couple in “Untitled,” from 1974 (above), cling to each other so tightly that they almost become a single mass, their near-kissing mouths mirroring one another. Celebrating intimacy was one way for Josefowitz to celebrate the everyday. She began “Woodstock,” her dance from 1983, by slowly, deliberately eating breakfast; later, stripped down to her underwear, she jumped and kicked and huffed and puffed before a giggling audience—her life force, and her gentle humor, a kind of balm.—*Jennifer Krasinski*

ART

Chris Burden

Whatever you think of this American artist, who died in 2015, at the age of sixty-nine, his ambition can’t be denied. Walking through “Cross Currents,” a show documenting twenty pieces he made between 1971 and 1980, you see how big Burden’s appetite was. All the quintessential American toys are here (cars, guns, A-bombs), along with the major media of the era. There he is in a 1973 copy of the *Times*, staring out from under a ski mask like a robber about to burst into a bank; he was only two years out of U.C. Irvine’s M.F.A. program, but already he’d fired a pistol at a Boeing 747 taking off from LAX, spent five days in a locker with two plastic bottles (one for drinking, one for pissing), and, most infamously, in 1971, been shot in the left arm by a friend. The title of the *Times* article, “He Got Shot—for His Art,” is a little misleading. The plan had been for Burden to walk away with a scratch and a Band-Aid, and it was bad aim, not bold artistry, that landed him in the hospital. Yet the legend of Burden the outlaw hero, willing to go all in on his performances, has proved ineradicable. Ignore the legend, though, and you’re left with a career in which the despicable—the dangerous, sure, but also the puerile, cynical, and hypocritical—forms a thick manure from which only a couple of major art works bloomed.—*Jackson Arn (Gagosian; June 24.)*

“Cecily Brown: Death and the Maid”

To reach this exhibition, visitors pass through the medieval collection and take a sharp turn at European decorative arts. It’s an ideal prelude to the British painter’s three-decade survey, priming the eye to spot the historical tropes in her bustling compositions, with their slathered pigment, puddled ink, and squirrelly gestures. The show’s title alludes to a strain of memento mori in which youthful femininity is shadowed by intimations of the macabre. The buttery sepia-and-pink “Aujourd’hui Rose,” from 2005, draws inspiration from a Victorian-era vignette; the dark hair of two young girls forms the eye sockets of a frame-filling skull, a blurred double image that recalls both a Baroque vanitas painting and a T-shirt for the American punk band the Misfits. Willem de Kooning, Francis Bacon, and other titans of the twentieth century loom large in Brown’s treatment of the figure, even as her art-historical references reach further into the past. The teeming activity of the grand “Father of the Bride,” from 1999, calls to mind Jackson Pollock attempting a Breugelian crowd scene. A more recent canvas, “Lobsters, Oysters, Cherries, and Pearls,” from 2020, is a bloodbath masquerading as a Flemish still-life (or vice versa), wherein a black cat lurks under a table, out of the fray. The feline’s gleaming eyes suggest that, like the artist herself, it is a savvy observer of painting’s great themes, sex and death.—*Johanna Fateman (Metropolitan Museum of Art; Dec. 3.)*

Blaise Cendrars

This tiny but potent one-room exhibit surveys the artistic and literary fallout surrounding the work of this willfully combustible twentieth-century Swiss poet and publisher. At the center of the show is Cendrars’s seminal collaboration with the artist Sonia Delaunay-Terk: a glorious book, from 1913—printed vertically, and rising here like the Eiffel Tower—that pairs Cendrars’s poem “The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France” with Delaunay-Terk’s abstract watercolors. Together, they lurch and roll to rhythms as unyielding as the locomotive that a teen-age Cendrars rode through Russia. Mesmerized by modernity and how its many new machines bent time and perception, Cendrars championed, and conspired with, those equally possessed by the spirit of the age. Works by such artists as Robert Delaunay, Alexander Archipenko, and Tarsila do Amaral hang alongside poster advertisements by A. M. Cassandre, illustrated books, printed programs, and more—state-of-the-art creations that somehow feel as if they’ve arrived from the future.—*Jennifer Krasinski (The Morgan Library & Museum; Sept. 24.)*

MUSIC

Caramoor

CLASSICAL This summer, in Westchester, Caramoor strikes a balance across centuries of repertoire. Baroque-era opera—which has steadily supplanted bel canto at the Katonah-based festival—crowns the Venetian Theatre, with Francesca Caccini’s graceful “La Liber-

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azione di Ruggiero dall'Isola d'Alcina," in a staging by Boston Early Music Festival (June 25), and with Handel's pastoral "Acis and Galatea," in a performance by the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra (July 23). Elegant pianism also has a place: Hélène Grimaud plays Ravel's Piano Concerto in G Major (July 16), and Garrick Ohlsson undertakes an all-Chopin program (July 30). For adventures of a more recent vintage, Sandbox Percussion unpacks Andy Akiho's "Seven Pillars" (June 30)—a musical discourse of dry thwacks and metallic tolls—and the bass-baritone Davóne Tines sings his "Recital No. 1: MASS," a stylistically fluid curation of faith-based music (July 13).—*Oussama Zahr (Various venues; through Aug. 6.)*

George Cables Trio

JAZZ It wasn't so long ago that George Cables was a vital member of a swarming tribe of talented and dependable hard-bop-besotted pianists who'd come of age in the sixties and seventies—radiant journeymen who never took hold of the spotlight yet were indispensable to the careers of other, more illustrious figures. With many of his peers gone, Cables is among the last of a gifted generation, still panning gold from his keyboard. At seventy-eight, and with one leg amputated owing to illness, he calls on a lifetime of experience as his anchor. Cables, who's been a go-to sideman for Freddie Hubbard, Bobby Hutcherson, and Art Pepper, has generated strong recordings as a leader and can be regularly heard with the Cookers ensemble. Taking the stage at this venerable club, he heads a trio supported by the bassist Essiet Okon Essiet and the drummer Jerome Jennings. Quiet as it's kept, Cables is a genuine national treasure, and attention must be paid.—*Steve Futterman (Village Vanguard; June 20-25.)*

Prison and Mike Donovan

ROCK If indie rock was once the domain of the scrappy and the clamorous, it seems increasingly tamed, for better or for worse, by keyboards, computers, and a generational tendency toward cautiousness. This free bill, at a burger shack on Rockaway Beach's boardwalk, offers a rowdy rejoinder. The studiously unkempt sound of Prison—the sloppy joes to those burgers—is built around Paul Major, a guitarist known for fronting the minimalist jam band Endless Boogie. A quintet of veterans with a début album around the corner, Prison presents rock-as-endurance-test, with sprawling songs that loosely jell around a gnarl of guitars. Among the group's featured players is Mike Donovan, whose own work, whether in Sic Alps or the Peacers, or as a solo artist, is more serene but hardly mannered: a glorious haze clouds his songs, dosing them with mystery and cool. As with Prison, his music bubbles with life, revelling in its bumps.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Rippers, Rockaway Beach Boardwalk at 86th St.; June 24.)*

Mike Servito

HOUSE If dancers in the club move more aggressively and more sharply than usual, there's a good chance that Mike Servito is on the decks. A Detroit native who has lived in Brooklyn for much of the past two decades, Servito tends to bear down, with a fearsome sense of swing, on crisp, hurtling tracks. Although he hasn't produced or remixed many recordings himself, he's immediately recognizable. Servito is often a cleanup hitter, going on deep into a night's lineup and rejuvenating the diehards; at the party Occupy the Disco: Pride, however, he begins in the daylight, playing on a rooftop, alongside Gabrielle Kwarteng, for twelve hours.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Le Bain at the Standard; June 25.)*

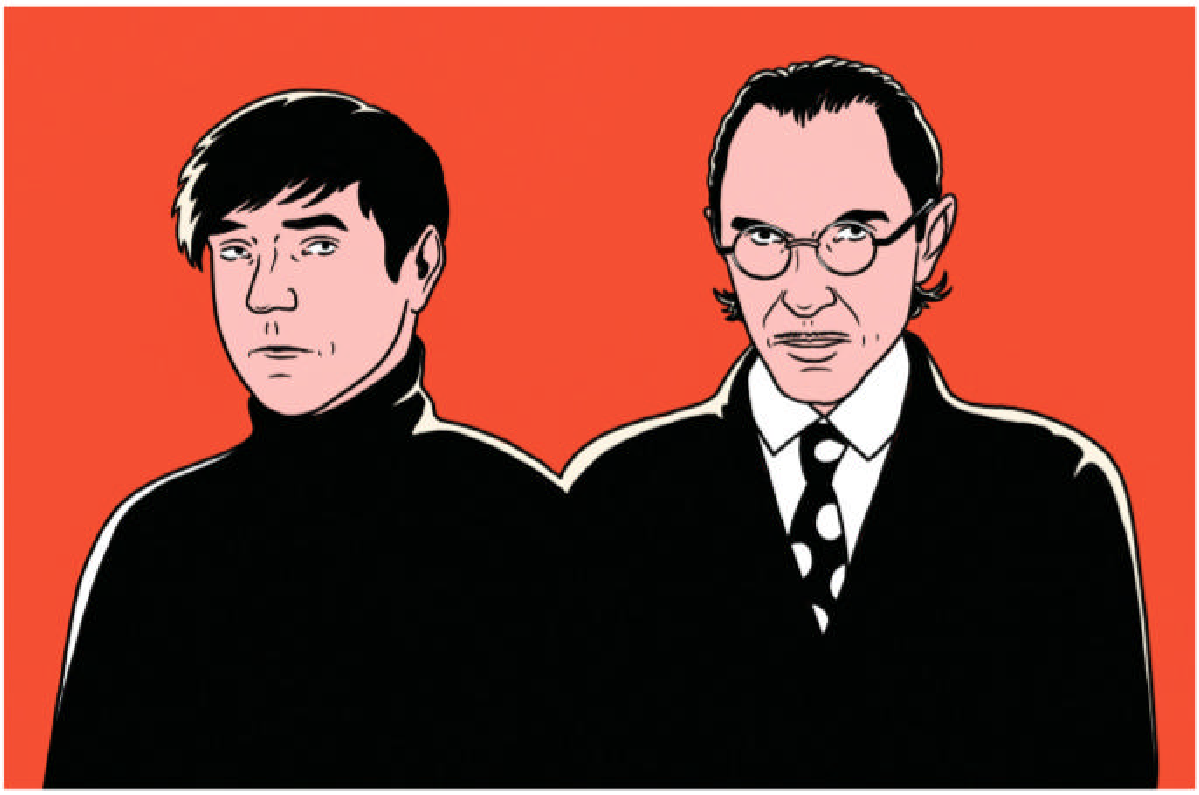
"Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night"

DISCO Before the blockbuster release of "Saturday Night Fever," in 1977, "disco" had a very different meaning—indicating a range of styles rather than the specific one, hooked on a stereotypical kick-hat pattern, that became a cliché in the film's wake. Think of "Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night," a compilation named for the Nik Cohn story from which "Fever" was adapted, as a prequel to the movie's famous soundtrack. Its twenty-two tracks—many from such soul veterans as Ben E. King, Richard (Popcorn) Wylie, and Betty Everett—were chosen from the playlists of Brooklyn club d.j.s during disco's crucible years, but their homier vibe evokes wood panelling rather than a lit-up dance floor.—*M.M. (Available on CD or LP.)*

Zola Jesus

ROCK At the core of Nika Roza Danilova's gothic-pop excavations is a towering opera-trained voice, which resonates like an earthquake capable of seismic ruptures. Perhaps this is why Danilova, who performs as Zola Jesus, has increasingly pushed her music and cultural presence in the direction of evermore political and corporeal terrain. Her latest record, the rhythm-oriented "Arkhon," contains the vertiginous refrain "Everyone I know is lost"; rather than a road map out, it offers potent energy. Agitating toward movement, "Arkhon" further expands a consequential discography that has swept from abrasive noise to orchestral renditions and torrential melodies, resulting in powerful amalgams of it all. As part of the fifteenth-anniversary celebrations for this Greenwich Village club, she and her band present the fire and the ash of Zola Jesus's guttural, trenchant songs.—*Jenn Pelly (Le Poisson Rouge; June 22.)*

ROCK



The glam-rock provocateurs **Sparks** are notable, in part, for the onstage incongruity of the Mael brothers: Russell is high energy and theatrical, swaggering about like a child navigating the booths at a carnival, whereas Ron is nearly unresponsive, stone-faced behind his keyboard. There is also the cheekiness that has sustained the band since its début, in 1971: on record covers, they have appeared as (among many other things) hostages on a speedboat, boxers after a K.O., a ventriloquist and his sock puppet, and underwear models. Throughout twenty-six albums, the band's music has been carried by Russell's rangy, vivacious falsetto and Ron's measured playing, even as its sound has shifted toward synth-pop. Sparks' new album, "The Girl Is Crying in Her Latte," stretches the band's already robust synth palette while maintaining its facetious charms, which will be on display, on June 27, at the Beacon Theatre, the New York stop on the duo's biggest tour yet.—*Sheldon Pearce*

ILLUSTRATION BY JEAN MICHEL TIXIER

MOVIES

Dalíland

In 1974, breezing into New York three weeks ahead of an exhibit of his new work, the elderly Salvador Dalí (Ben Kingsley) has a big problem: he has yet to paint it. But, in the course of his riotous stay at the St. Regis hotel, he puts most of his efforts into the party-centric pleasure of managing his fame amid an ever-expanding entourage—and into feeding the vanity that accompanies it. In Mary Harron's keenly observed and poignant drama, the turmoil is witnessed from the perspective of James (Christopher Briney), a young and ingenuous gallery assistant whom Dalí "borrows" for three weeks and ropes into his manic swirl. James sees Dalí's wife, Gala (Barbara Sukowa), manage the enterprise with forceful practicality and risk it with her own social delusions. James's view of Dalí's antics is similarly complex: the painter's frivolity conceals a vital imagination, his grandiloquent manner yields profound aesthetic observations. The movie falls flat past the midway point, when James's disillusionment comes to the fore, but Kingsley and Sukowa dominate the film with a fabulous blend of self-dramatizing flair and arch precision.—*Richard Brody (In theatrical release and on video on demand.)*

The Killing Floor

The first feature directed by Bill Duke, from 1984, is a revelatory historical drama that offers a powerful template for social analysis in fiction. The film follows Frank Custer (Damien Leake), a young Black man who, in 1917, moves from his small home town to Chicago. There, he finds work in a slaughterhouse, joins its union, and organizes other Black workers. But, the following year, when the First World War ends and returning veterans reclaim their jobs, management undermines the integrated union by stoking dissension between Black laborers and white ones; that conflict leads, in 1919, to race riots that leave the city's Black neighborhoods in ruins. The deeply researched script, by Leslie Lee, displays in intricate detail both large-scale political forces and local conflicts. Frank is in every one of Duke's stark yet teeming tableaux, which present the lasting effects and daily aggressions of racism, and the struggles of organized labor, as personal experience.—*R.B. (Streaming on Prime Video, Vudu, and other services.)*

Monkey Business

Starting with the credit sequence, a mini-meta-masterpiece in which Cary Grant repeatedly misses his cue, Howard Hawks's 1952 science comedy is a summit of frenetic invention. Grant plays Barnaby Fulton, an absent-minded chemist with Coke-bottle glasses who concocts a rejuvenation formula that turns out to work all too well. Though he's happily married to Edwina (Ginger Rogers)—and Hawks saucily highlights the enduring erotic spark in their long (albeit childless) marriage—Barnaby's first act under the formula's influence is the ardent pursuit of his boss's secretary, Miss Laurel (Marilyn Monroe). The jokes strike below the belt, as with a fish jumping into the pants of a doughy C.E.O. (Charles Coburn), but a mightier madness erupts when restored youth regresses further, to full-blown childhood, which for Hawks is no realm of lost innocence but a whirl of wild jealousy and murderous passion. (His humor also lamentably includes stereotypes of Native Americans.) The simians of the title are present throughout, as the kissing cousins of the men of reason whose laboratory houses them.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel, Prime Video, and other services.)*

The World's End

This 2013 comedy, the third in a triptych, reunites the director Edgar Wright with his star and co-writer Simon Pegg, plus an eager squadron of supporting players. The setting is a dreary British town, to which Gary (Pegg, noisier than before) goes back, accompanied by four reluctant friends, in a bid to relive—and, if possible, improve upon—a drinking bout from their teen-age years. The fun comes from a clash between the unglamorous grind of routine and the onset of sudden dramatic energy, fuelled entirely by a mashup with a sci-fi apocalypse story. The gonzo side of the plot is not quite as engaging as the human drama, and the scenes in which the characters meet up and try to mesh again are some of the best in the film. As the jokes fly, and as the alcohol consumption goes off the charts, we notice, more strongly than ever, one abiding theme of the triptych: the fear, among grown men, that the growing may have been a waste of time. With Nick Frost, Martin Freeman, Rosamund Pike, and the wry, droning voice of Bill Nighy.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 9/2/13.) (Streaming on Prime Video, Apple TV, and other services.)*

For more reviews, visit
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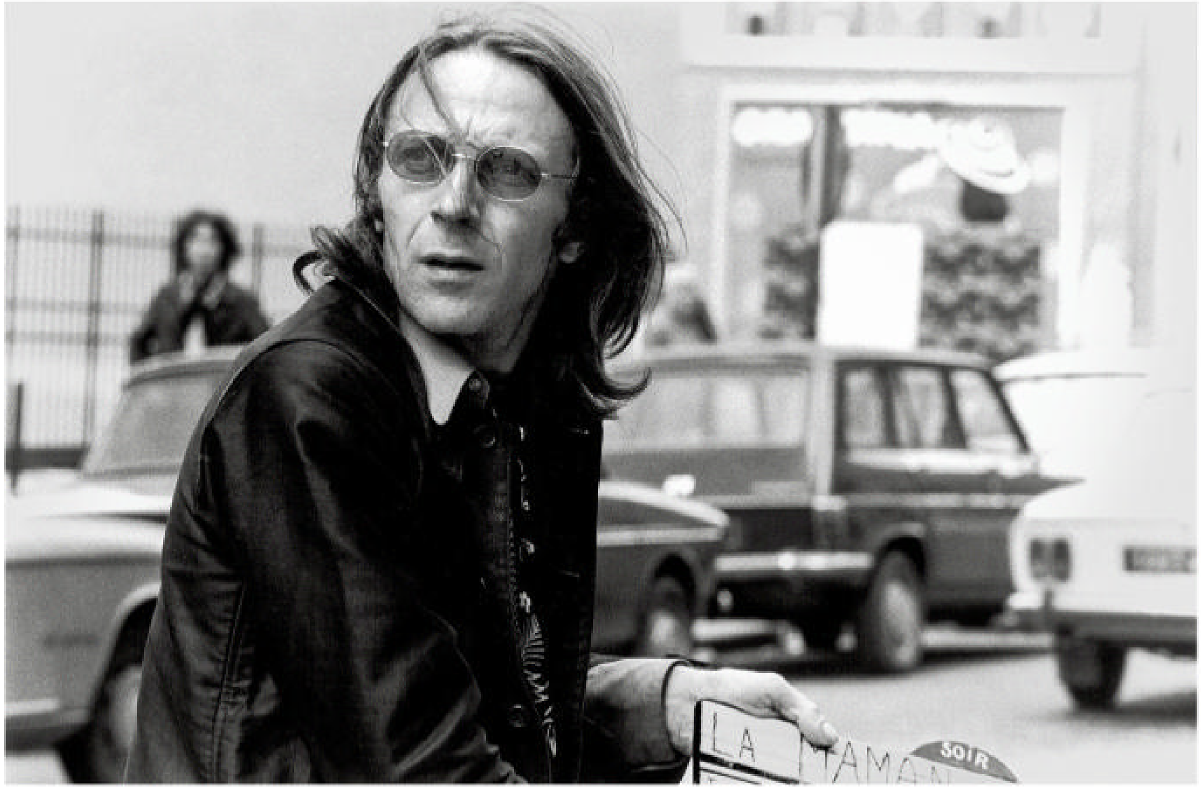
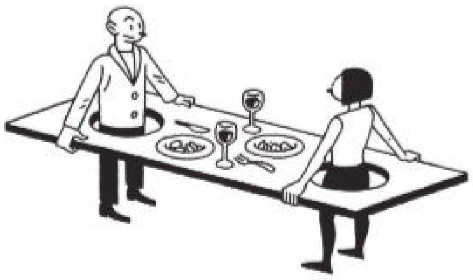
ON THE BIG SCREEN



COURTESY PHOTO BERNARD PRIM COLLECTION

A gaping hole in film history is filled by the restoration and reissue of the films of **Jean Eustache,** a crucial heir of the French New Wave, presented in a complete retrospective at Film at Lincoln Center (June 23-July 13). The series opens with his masterwork, "The Mother and the Whore," from 1973, a definitive yet paradoxical drama of France's post-1968 youth which blends sexual freedom with romantic possessiveness, philosophical riffs with popular tradition, radical insolence with right-wing provocations. Though much in the film is autobiographical, its intellectual loam is found in Eustache's earlier documentaries, including "The Virgin of Pessac," from 1969, which depicts the nomination, election, and coronation of the Rose Queen, a young woman of ostensible virtue, in the small winemaking town where Eustache was born. The formalities, of medieval origin, took place just weeks after the overwhelming protests of May, 1968, that transformed the country; a priest's remarkable sermon in honor of the Rose Queen links traditional Christian duty to the spirit of dissent and liberation, reflecting Eustache's connection of his own rural roots to his artistic calling. Eleven years later, the filmmaker returned to the subject with "The Virgin of Pessac '79" and, indeed, found the townspeople freer and less inhibited, yet ill at ease with the rapid pace of modernization.—*Richard Brody*



TABLES FOR TWO

Revelie Luncheonette

179 Prince St.

In the past forty years, SoHo has largely transformed, from grungy, affordable artists' haven to couture mall geared toward tourists. But some things have stayed more or less the same: Raoul's, for example, the French bistro opened by Alsatian brothers, Serge and Guy Raoul, in 1975. I went for dinner the other night and found its old pay phone, still just outside the rest rooms, as well as an array of more than serviceable timeless classics—frisée with lardons, steak tartare and au poivre, profiteroles with chocolate poured tableside. A uniformed but relaxed middle-aged bartender made me an excellent dirty Martini.

Earlier this year, Serge's son, Karim Raoul, who took over Raoul's in 2014, expanded the family business with a second place, directly across the street, called Revelie Luncheonette. (It's named for Karim's daughters, Rêve and Amelie, and it's open for dinner in addition to lunch.) If I didn't know better, I'd believe that it, too, had been around since 1975. One recent afternoon, an early episode of "The Price Is Right" was playing on a TV above a big counter, which is lined with vinyl-capped chrome stools. Vintage posters hang above comfortable booths, beneath a tin ceiling. A young man trying to get the attention of his server—and sitting, as it happened, next to the restaurant's working dumbwaiter—called out, "Hey, boss!"

With the exception of sriracha (mixed with honey and served with chicken tenders), an Impossible Burger, and a baby-kale Caesar salad, nothing that comes out of the kitchen adheres to recent trends, or indicates ego or pretension on the part of the chefs, David Honeysett and Moussa Thiam. It's easy to imagine the menu's French café standards—a lovely onion tart, accompanied by a lightly dressed mesclun salad; a superlative croque-madame; a stack of *jambon-beurre*, the classic ham-and-butter sandwich, displayed under a glass cloche—having been served for decades across the street, if Raoul's were open for lunch. You might be disappointed to learn that the burger here is not the same as the one at Raoul's—offered in famously limited quantities, topped with au-poivre mayonnaise, triple-cream Saint-André cheese, watercress, red onion, and cornichon. But it's hard to argue with Revelie's straightforward patty on a soft white bun, with shredded lettuce, tomato, American cheese, and mayo, or with the oozy patty melt, caramelized onions spilling out from between two crisped, buttered slices of rye sourdough. (There's also a satisfying veggie melt, with goat cheese, mushrooms, roasted peppers, and spinach.)

Fries come separately but are worth it, crinkle-cut and slightly Frenchified with a smattering of garlic and parsley. Even better are the paper-thin, copper-colored potato chips, made in-house, that are scattered atop a perfect, towering B.L.T.—thick slices of buttery brioche with crisp bacon, shredded lettuce, tomato, and a horseradish rémoulade. If this all sounds a bit heavy, Revelie is probably not the place for you—I haven't even mentioned the French onion soup or the clams Casino.

Because this is a French restaurant, there is wine; the other night, I paired my roast chicken and coleslaw with a lovely Lambrusco. Because this is a luncheonette, there are milkshakes, made with ice cream from Adirondack Creamery (chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, pistachio) and overflowing from tall soda-fountain-style glasses. The same ice cream is scooped into house-made cream soda or cola, for floats, and packed into sundaes topped with hot fudge, whipped cream, sprinkles, and Luxardo maraschino cherries. Walking down Prince Street, en route to the subway, I passed a storefront I'd never noticed before—Sugar Wood, a self-described "sex-positive" bakery specializing in waffles shaped like human genitalia, complete with icing-as-bodily-fluid. I'm all for progress, but when it comes to dessert I'll take nostalgia. *(Dishes $13-34.)*

—Hannah Goldfield

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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
UNCHECKED BOXES

Donald Trump seems to collect people who push extreme legal theories, and in the days before January 6, 2021, a number of them were swarming around Vice-President Mike Pence. Their big idea was that Pence could use his position presiding over a joint session of Congress to toss out the electoral votes of several states—and that to do so would be totally constitutional. To Pence, it didn't add up. The American Revolution had been fought to get rid of a king, he wrote in his memoir: "The last thing the framers of the Constitution would have intended would be to confer unchecked authority on one individual."

Trump has a different view. He made that clear last Tuesday, after appearing in federal court in Miami for his arraignment on thirty-one felony charges of unauthorized retention of documents "relating to the national defense," in violation of the Espionage Act of 1917, and six additional felony charges alleging that he conspired to obstruct justice, and concealed and lied about the documents. (The Espionage Act, despite its name, is not confined to spying and is often used in cases involving government secrets.) The indictment was brought by the special counsel Jack Smith. Many of the documents were marked classified; many were kept in cardboard boxes that were moved around among a ballroom, a bathroom, and a closet at Trump's Mar-a-Lago club. He pleaded not guilty, calling the indictment "the Boxes Hoax," and blaming it on President Biden and "his closest thugs, misfits, and Marxists." The root of the hoax, to Trump's mind, is the prosecutors' unwillingness to acknowledge the power of Trump.

"The President enjoys unconstrained authority to make decisions regarding disposal of documents," he told supporters at his Bedminster golf club, hours after his arraignment. By way of explanation for this assertion of power, which would go well beyond a President's ability to classify and declassify documents, he gave a garbled rendition of a 2010 lawsuit in which Judicial Watch, a conservative activist group, sued the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in an attempt to force it to gain possession of audiocassettes of Bill Clinton speaking with a historian while he was President, which he had kept. (Trump calls this "the Clinton Socks Case," because the cassettes were kept for a time in Clinton's sock drawer; Socks was also the name of the Clintons' cat, who was not involved.) The case wasn't about classified materials but about the distinction between personal and Presidential records, and the extent to which the Presidential Records Act allows the President to draw that line. The judge ruled against Judicial Watch.

One would think that this decision—which involved very different circumstances, was limited in scope, and never reached the Supreme Court—would not be of much use to Trump. How could he assert that documents marked "Top Secret" which concerned the "military capabilities of a foreign country" (cited in count seventeen of the indictment) or "nuclear capabilities" (count five) are personal records? Those documents were generated by other executive agencies, according to the indictment, not during a cozy conversation with a historian.

Trump's answer is brazen and breathtaking: he claims that if he just calls a document personal—whether it plausibly is or is not—no one can even question him about it. "Whatever documents a President decides to take with him, he has the right," Trump said. "It's an absolute right. This is the law." It is not the law, and it would be absurd to think that the P.R.A., which was enacted after Watergate precisely to limit a President's ability to hold on to official records, is actually a license to loot. By his own reasoning, Trump could take the original parchment Constitution, stash it in one of his boxes, and walk away with it.

Trump seemed to expect that the Bedminster crowd would cheer his boasts about having the power to, in effect, lie to NARA and to the country, and many people did. In polls, he leads the field for

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

the G.O.P. Presidential nomination by a margin that has only grown wider since his previous indictment, in April, in New York, on state charges related to an alleged hush-money payment. (Trump pleaded not guilty.) Primary season is looking to take the form of a legal demolition derby, with another indictment expected soon in Georgia, this one involving alleged efforts by Trump to overturn the 2020 election results; Smith may also be working on additional federal charges against Trump, related to January 6th. The cases may not be resolved by Election Day, 2024. A felony conviction would not preclude Trump's becoming President again.

The question of Presidential power does factor into the documents case. Smith may have turned to the Espionage Act in part because, perhaps surprisingly, a prosecutor does not need to show that national-defense information held without authorization was ever classified—thus avoiding a fight over which of the documents are still classified. (According to the indictment, there are recordings of Trump saying that a number of them were not declassified.) The statute itself is disturbingly vague as to what a prosecutor does need to show, beyond that a defendant should have been aware that such information "could be used to the injury of the United States or to the advantage of any foreign nation." Also, according to current case law, it should be closely held by the government.

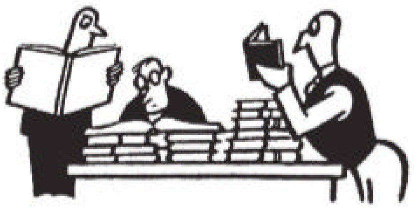
Trump's retention of the documents and his careless storage of them—in a club that hosted thousands of guests—appear to easily clear the bar for an Espionage Act conviction. (The obstruction-related charges also look strong: Trump does not seem to have been subtle in his box-shuffling scheme.) But it is true that the Espionage Act bar is low, and, as a result, the law has been abused, before and after various amendments. It was the means of prosecuting pacifists during the First World War; Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers, and died last week; and Reality Winner, a National Security Agency translator who leaked a single classified report about Russian election interference in 2018—during the Trump Administration. She was sentenced to more than five years in prison.

Trump's trials thus may offer an opportunity to think about how we police secrecy. At the same time, Trump is already pushing his supporters to accept a dangerous interpretation of Presidential power—and of his personal power, which in his mind may be the same thing. We appear to be headed toward a period in American politics that is particularly unconstrained and unchecked, in ways that the Framers, as Pence would put it, might never have intended but would certainly have feared.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

PAYING ATTENTION

RESEARCH ASSISTANT



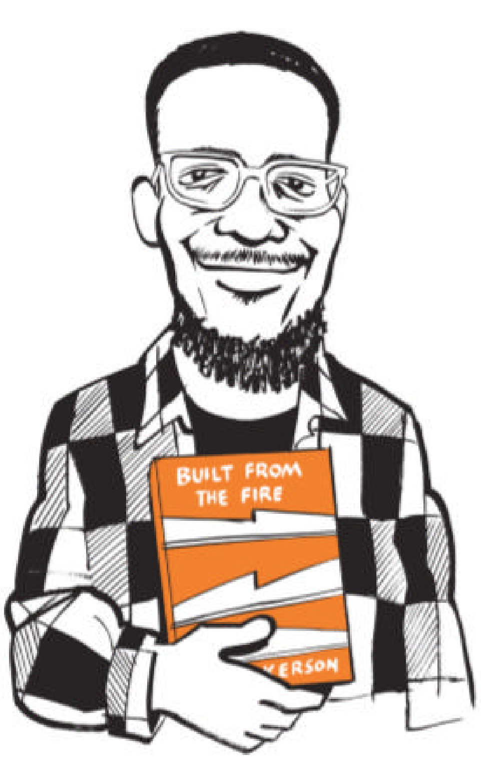
Last month, the journalist Victor Luckerson published "Built from the Fire," a comprehensive history of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and its enduring consequences and resonances in Greenwood, the heart of Black North Tulsa. On May 31st of that year, and continuing into the next day, an armed mob of hundreds of white men invaded Greenwood, looting, burning, and murdering. Despite Jim Crow and merciless segregation, trickle-down prosperity from an oil boom in its third decade had made Greenwood boom, too; its thriving commercial district was celebrated as Black Wall Street. In a matter of hours, thirty-five blocks of houses, businesses, professional offices, churches—all of it—had been reduced to ashy ruins. Thousands of Greenwood residents became homeless, and as many as three hundred others died, making the massacre one of the deadliest known episodes of racial violence in American history.

A native of Montgomery, Alabama, Luckerson first visited Tulsa in the spring of 2018, to report for the Web site the Ringer on preparations for the massacre's centennial. Soon after his six-thousand-word dispatch was published, he knew that he wanted a more expansive canvas—what would become his first book—and the following year he settled in Tulsa. ("I had a somewhat romantic notion of, when I turned thirty, moving someplace where I didn't know anyone and starting a new life, so to speak," he said.) For research assistance, he had in mind an ideal candidate, his then thirteen-year-old cousin, Stanley (Jacks) Stoutamire, Jr.—"one of the smartest people" he knew.

During a Zoom conversation on the book's publication date, the week after Stoutamire's graduation from high school in Birmingham, he and Luckerson discussed the movement in many red states to prohibit the inclusion of the history of events like the massacre in public-school curricula. In what did not seem like a coincidence, a couple of weeks before the centennial, Oklahoma's governor, Kevin Stitt, signed House Bill 1775, which banned, among other things, classroom discussions that would cause any "individual [to] feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex."

Stoutamire began working for Luckerson the summer after his freshman year of high school, in 2020, within days of the broad-daylight murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in Minnesota. One of his first assignments was to immerse himself in the summer of 1919, known as the Red Summer, when an epidemic of white-supremacist attacks and lynchings terrorized Black people in more than thirty American cities, prefiguring the Tulsa Race Massacre.

"In the teaching of American history," Stoutamire said, "there's a focus on sig-



Victor Luckerson

nal events—the signing of the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address, the big moments that make America as good as we would like it to be. Growing up and going to school in Birmingham, there were lots of conversations about the civil-rights legacy of the city. I attended Catholic schools and feel that I received a really solid education. Certain things are deemed essential. Working with Victor on this book introduced me to the many chapters of Black history that are often not considered essential.”

In the fall of Luckerson’s freshman year at the University of Alabama, in 2008, he voted for the first time in a Presidential election—for Barack Obama. “My parents grew up in Jim Crow Alabama,” he said. “And to go from their experiences to me voting for the first Black President, I got this idea in my head that American progress might be linear, and that the country might just keep progressing in a positive way. The experience of the last ten years, the ongoing and escalating conservative backlash to racial progress, has opened my eyes. Progress is actually very cyclical. I think a lot about where I was when I was Stanley’s age compared to where I am now. Stanley is way ahead of the curve.”

“Working with Victor on ‘Built from the Fire,’ ” said Stoutamire, who will enter Princeton in September, “has always been a project about both education and inspiration, especially doing research about subjects like the Red Summer. Understanding that there are not just dark but distinctly bloody chapters in American history. I think the inspiration for me is understanding that the darkest days are typically not the last days, that there is a future. But now there are laws targeting books like ‘Built from the Fire,’ and I had no idea that was coming. I always approach things with the idea that people have the best of intentions in mind. To target works of literature or history because they are uncomfortable is just totally bewildering to me. Throughout my four years of high school, in all my English classes, we talked about how good literature is supposed to challenge you. The same with history. If you feel one hundred per cent comfortable with the history that you’re learning, then you’re either not paying attention or not learning all of it.”

—*Mark Singer*

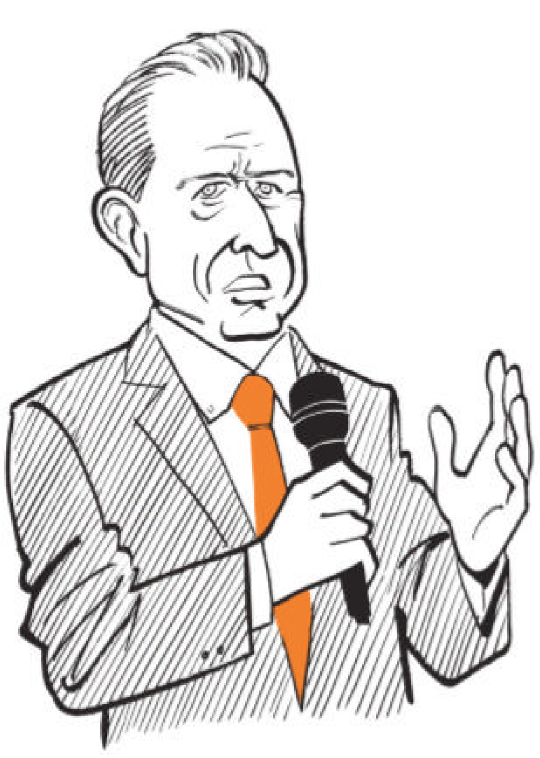
NEPO BABY DEPT.

NO SOUND BITES, PLEASE

Each American President tends to find the broadcast medium that most suits his needs. If F.D.R. was the radio President, J.F.K. was the TV President, and Trump was the Twitter President, could Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.—a practitioner of a paranoid, conspiratorial, and only occasionally fact-based brand of politics—be the first podcast candidate? A couple of weeks ago, after doing a town hall with the Sirius XM radio host Michael Smerconish, at a theatre in Norristown, Pennsylvania, Kennedy admitted that the podcast might be his best path forward. The format fits his message—twisted diatribes against vaccines, punctuated with wonky “have you read the study?”-style exhortations.

“The same way my uncle discovered television in 1960 and realized it was going to be a new path to the White House, podcasts are a good media for me, because my weakest media is the short sound bite,” Kennedy, who was relaxing offstage in a blue suit, said. (His wife, Cheryl Hines, who plays Larry David’s wife on “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” was taking a break from the campaign because of a recent foot surgery.) “My voice doesn’t work for five or six minutes, until I get my vocal cords to kind of loosen up.” (He has a vocal condition called spasmodic dysphonia.) He was in a good mood, because, after he launched his campaign, Instagram lifted its ban on his account; he’d been suspended for posting medical misinformation. “I do have a chance with podcasts, because I’m able to outrun the censorship juggernaut,” he said.

At the town hall, Kennedy had touched on some of the preoccupations that now double as his campaign issues: the purported (but entirely unproven) link between vaccines and autism, why America is to blame for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the real story behind his uncle’s assassination (C.I.A., in collusion with the Mob), and the possible connection between SSRIs and mass shootings. On other occasions, he has flirted with H.I.V./AIDS denialism, and questioned whether Sirhan Sirhan actually fired the shots that killed his father, R.F.K. (The candidate has said that he forgives Sirhan for the assassination, and also that Sirhan didn’t do it.) Despite the nutball theories, he has been endorsed by such well-known non-experts as Jack Dorsey, Aaron Rodgers, and Alicia Silverstone. One recent Presidential poll shows that he has the highest favorability ratings of anyone in the race, and another that he is the choice of almost a quarter of Democrats, making him Biden’s main challenger in the Party.



Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.

Kennedy, an environmental lawyer, has been an anti-vaxxer for decades, and has blamed vaccines for everything from peanut allergies to A.D.H.D. Like a lot of podcasters, he tends to ramble. After his speech, there was no time left for voters to ask questions.

Perhaps he’d be more obliging backstage? Kennedy retired to a side room and sipped a decaf tea. What was at stake in his campaign? “Everybody realizes they’re not living in a democracy anymore,” he said. “They’ve lost sovereignty of their lives, and their futures, as a result, are hopeless. I think it all flows from a cynicism and despair that flows from this corrupt merger of state-corporate power.”

What about political role models? “On my campaign, I talk about historic insurgencies, including Castro’s,” he said. “He took fifty-three men in a rickety boat and landed from Mexico to Cuba, and most of them were killed. Two years later, he marched into Havana." He went on, "My campaign is a kind of strong spiritual-based fire."

Did he have any favorite books he'd read recently? He took a long pause, tapping his foot. He named a few, including "Team of Rivals."

It was time to go. Kennedy left for his hotel room to do a Twitter Spaces event with Elon Musk and Tulsi Gabbard. (His next stop was the Mexican border, which he wants to seal; last week, he went on "The Joe Rogan Experience.") In the lobby of the Norristown theatre, audience members compared notes. His followers include a chunk of the podcast-loving, seed-oil-skeptical, raw-milk-drinking crowd.

Grace O'Callaghan, a medical sales rep, and her sister, Ann Marie Barnett, an account executive at a technology company, had attended to assess whether the candidate appeared cogent in person. "He has a lot of conspiracy theories, so we wanted to dig deeper," O'Callaghan said.

"I've heard him on Russell Brand's show," Barnett said. "He's an independent thinker."

O'Callaghan went on, "I really admired his dad. I actually wish he were J.F.K., Jr.!" She was puzzled that his popularity was holding strong, "even though he's been debunked," she said.

Liz Einecke, a retired teacher who is drawn to Kennedy's environmental record, said that she was gathering information. "If I vote for him, people will say, 'Oh, you're an anti-vaxxer *and* an environmentalist,'" she said.

James Taulbee, an Iraq veteran, wore a vintage "Kennedy for President" (J.F.K.) T-shirt accessorized with heavy turquoise jewelry. He held up a book called "JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters" and said, "There's a lot of loose ends that I always was curious about that are starting to tie up. Every single thing that the government has so adamantly tried to convince me of has turned out to be a lie."

Taulbee, who hosts "The Are You Experienced Podcast," went on, "This is a perfect-case scenario. If I vote for Trump and then Mr. Kennedy becomes President, it's win-win for me. I'm hopeful now that there's a lot more guys out there drawing the conclusions I have."

—*Antonia Hitchens*

POSTSCRIPT

ROBERT GOTTLIEB

Early this year, Film Forum, the redoubtable revival house on West Houston Street, drew overflow crowds for a documentary about two elderly men squaring off over semicolons and commas. The film, "Turn Every Page," starred the semicolon-deploying biographer Robert Caro and the semicolon-averse editor Robert Gottlieb, who for many years was the head honcho at Simon & Schuster and then at Alfred A. Knopf, and from 1987 to 1992 was the editor of *The New Yorker*. Their relationship—intense, wary, mysterious—lasted a half century. It began with "The Power Broker," Caro's biography of Robert Moses, which, to its author's agony, Gottlieb trimmed by some three hundred and fifty thousand words.

Audiences at Film Forum thrilled to the climactic scene in which Caro and Gottlieb sit side by side in an antiseptic office, intently reviewing a manuscript page from Caro's study of Lyndon Johnson. These two secular Talmudists are hunched over the page, sharing a pencil and arguing about matters of punctuation, syntax, rhythm, and clarity. There is a deep bond between them, a distinctly unsentimental partnership in which everything is about purpose, choices, and decisions, never sloppy praise or even encouragement.

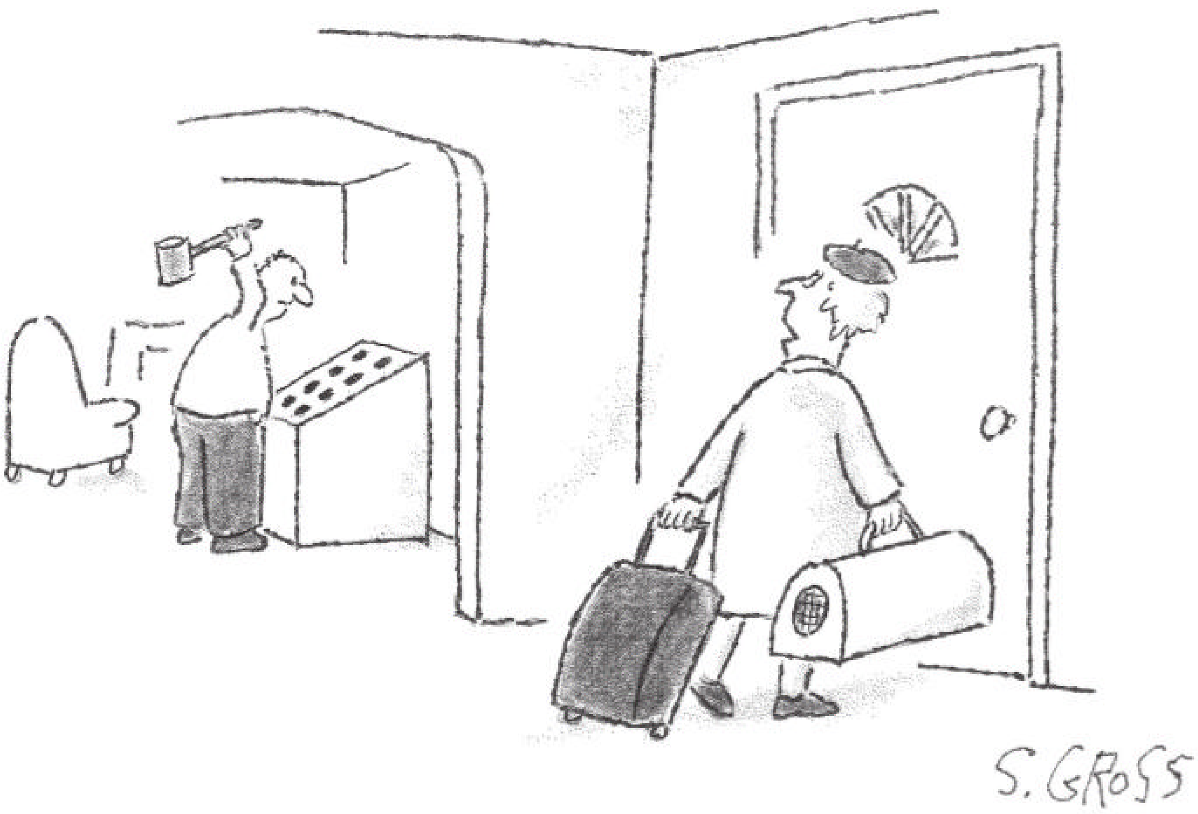
In a *Paris Review* interview, Caro said, "In all the hours of working on 'The Power Broker,' Bob never said one nice thing to me—never a single complimentary word, either about the book as a whole or about a single portion of the book. That was also true of my second book, 'The Path to Power,' the first volume of the Johnson biography. But then he got soft. When we finished the last page of the last book we worked on, 'Means of Ascent,' he held up the manuscript for a moment and said, slowly, as if he didn't want to say it, 'Not bad.'"

Gottlieb, who died Wednesday, at the age of ninety-two, may have been the most important book editor of his time. Caro was just one of hundreds of authors he ministered to. Gottlieb had passions—among them literature, ballet, music, and the movies—and those passions were reflected in his long list of authors, which included John Cheever, Joseph Heller, John le Carré, Doris Lessing, Jessica Mitford, Toni Morrison, V. S. Naipaul, and Salman Rushdie; Mikhail Baryshnikov, Natalia Makarova, and Lincoln Kirstein; Bob Dylan, John Lennon, and Paul Simon; Lauren Bacall, Sidney Poitier, Elia Kazan, Katharine Hepburn, and Irene Selznick.

Morrison met Gottlieb when she was an editor at Random House and, in her off-hours, crafting her earliest novels. "Writing my first two books, 'The Bluest Eye' and 'Sula,' I had the anxiety of a new writer who needs to make sure every sentence is exactly the right one," she once said. "Sometimes that produces a kind of precious, jeweled quality—a tightness, which I particularly wanted in 'Sula.' Then after I finished 'Sula' and was working on the third book, 'Song of Solomon,' Bob said to me, 'You can loosen, open up.' It was as if he had said, 'Be reckless in your imagination.'"

Some of Gottlieb's editorial interventions became public. In 1961, Joseph Heller was coming out with a darkly comic war novel that he had titled "Catch-18." Unfortunately, Leon Uris, the best-selling author of "Exodus," was about to publish a novel called "Mila 18." Gottlieb had a late-night revelation and called Heller, recommending that the title be changed to "Catch-22," which, he declared, was somehow "funnier." The book turned out to be a modern classic and an immense best-seller, and Heller told the story of his title change to anyone who would listen.

Gottlieb was born in 1931, in New York City. At the dinner table, he and his parents all read books. After dinner, he went on reading. "From the start, words were more real to me than real life, and certainly more interesting," he wrote in his memoir, "Avid Reader." Gottlieb was a showoff, but not of the athletic sort. When he was in high school, he read "War and Peace" in "a single marathon fourteen-hour session." As an undergraduate, at Columbia, he read Proust: "seven volumes, seven days." After studying at Cambridge, he got his first job in publishing at Simon & Schus-



"I'm leaving you, Henry, and I'm taking the mole."

ter, in 1955. He went to Knopf, in 1968, as its editor-in-chief.

He moved to the magazine world in a peculiar way. By the mid-eighties, *The New Yorker* was facing a succession crisis. William Shawn, the revered editor of the magazine, had been in his chair, either as one of Harold Ross's top deputies or as editor, for more than four decades. He seemed unable to conceive of a future for the institution that didn't include him. S. I. Newhouse, whose family owned both Knopf and *The New Yorker*, decided to force the issue and replaced Shawn with Gottlieb. This caused a moment of pain and tumult at the magazine. Even though Gottlieb had edited books by many of its writers, nearly everyone on the staff signed a letter addressed to him, dated January 13, 1987, expressing "sadness and outrage over the manner in which a new editor has been imposed upon us," and urging him to "withdraw your acceptance of the post that has been offered to you."

Gottlieb politely declined to decline the job. Although he certainly published an enormous number of distinguished pieces of writing in *The New Yorker*—including John Cheever's diaries, Ian Frazier's "Great Plains," and Janet Malcolm's "The Journalist and the Murderer"—his boldest contribution may have been walking through the door in the first place. He seemed to understand that Shawn had been a hero to the magazine's staff members; their letter, as Malcolm later put it, was a gesture "made to make the beleaguered and embittered Mr. Shawn feel better, not to make Bob feel bad." The office eventually settled down and Gottlieb settled in, bringing his own insouciant and informal personality to West Forty-third Street. He was a colorful but calming presence. He never went out to lunch. He took immense pleasure in the magazine's editorial machinery, its fact checkers, editors, and "O.K.'ers." He padded around the place in the outfit of a Columbia undergrad of his generation (khakis, sports shirt, shoes optional), and he proudly exhibited, in his office, a sampling of his vast collection of plastic handbags. And he worked tremendously hard, reading manuscripts almost instantly as well as thoroughly, mindful of the anxious writer waiting by the telephone for some kind of reaction.

Although the magazine's economic fortunes were declining in those days, and critics argued that *The New Yorker* was sometimes more admired than read, Gottlieb declared himself "a conserver by nature, not a revolutionary." He told Newhouse "that I felt I could make it a better version of what it was, not turn it into something it wasn't." Gottlieb wasn't a journalist by background, and yet he brought in Alma Guillermoprieto to write from Latin America, Julian Barnes to write a Letter from London, and Joan Didion to write about California. He also had a fondness for the Americana and curios illuminated by the then married writing team of Jane and Michael Stern, who published stories about chilies, rodeo bull riders, and parrots.

In 1992, Newhouse decided he needed an agent of editorial change, not curation, and replaced Gottlieb with Tina Brown, who had successfully resurrected *Vanity Fair*. Gottlieb accepted the decision with equanimity, perhaps even a sense of liberation. He continued to edit some writers at Knopf ex officio, including Caro, and began writing for *The New York Review of Books*, the New York *Observer*, and *The New Yorker*. He wrote books about George Balanchine, Sarah Bernhardt, the Dickens family, and Greta Garbo (the audio version of which was read by his wife, the actress Maria Tucci). He published his high-spirited memoir. And he retained, to the end, an outsized taste for the kitschy and the absurd. Daniel Mendelsohn, a writer and a close friend, told Gottlieb, as he lay dying in the hospital, that his room was in a complex named, in part, for the notorious, dog-devoted real-estate figure Leona Helmsley. He seemed delighted and said, "Is that *true*?!"

As in any life, there is unfinished business. Robert Caro is still working on the fifth and final volume of his Johnson biography, a book that must cover the colossal events of that dramatic Presidency: voting rights, civil rights, the Vietnam War and the protests against it. Caro is eighty-seven and hires no researchers. He works on legal pads and a Smith Corona Electra 210. More than a decade ago, when Gottlieb was eighty and Caro was seventy-five, the editor assessed the situation, in a story he later shared with the *Times*. "The actuarial odds are that if you take however many more years you're going to take, I'm not going to be here," he'd told Caro. As Gottlieb saw things, "The truth is, Bob doesn't really need me, but he thinks he does."

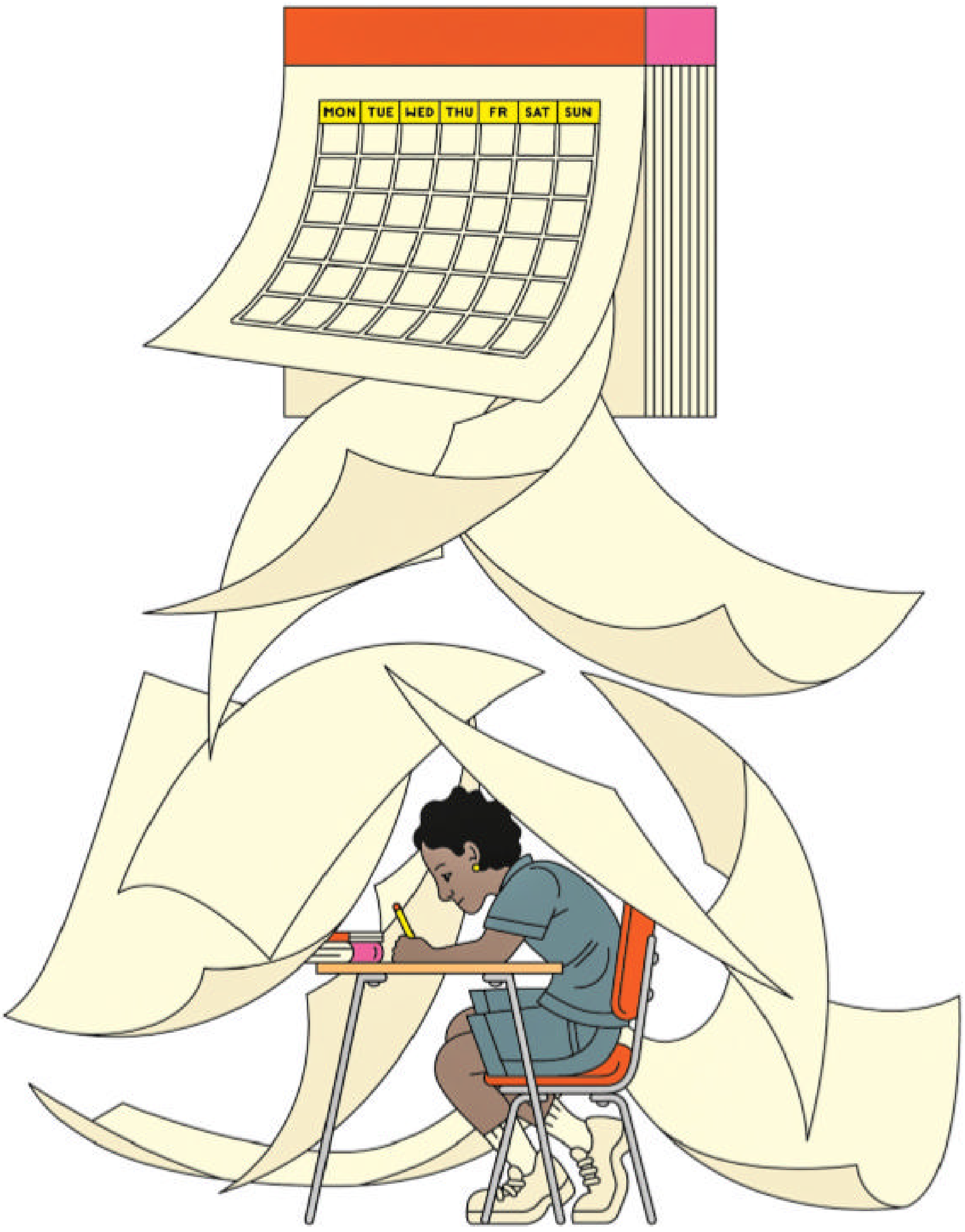
—*David Remnick*

LETTER FROM VIRGINIA

THE PANDEMIC GENERATION

Remote school was devastating for many kids. How can they get back on track?

BY ALEC MACGILLIS



In Richmond, a plan to switch to a year-round calendar brought controversy.

Angela Wright became the principal of Fairfield Court Elementary School, in Richmond, Virginia, in the fall of 2020, but she didn't meet her students until a year later. At the start of the pandemic, Richmond had moved all of its twenty-two thousand students to remote learning. By the time they returned to the classroom, in September, 2021, after every other school district in the state, it had been eighteen months since they'd been inside a school building.

For Wright, the posting at Fairfield Court was the culmination of a steady rise: from instructional assistant to teacher to assistant principal to principal. When her father saw her first monthly paycheck as a teacher, he asked, "Is this for a week?" "He said, 'Are you sure this is what you want to do?'" she recalled. "I said, 'Yes.' When you see kids light up, when you see that they get it, when you see kids who were tier three or lower rise to the top . . ."

Wright had previously been a principal in a rural school district, but after arriving in the Richmond system she settled for being an assistant principal for a few years. "Coming into an urban school district, I wanted to step back and take a look at their structure, their processes," she said. Now she was eager to tackle the challenges facing the student body, which was almost entirely Black. Many of the students lived in an adjoining public-housing development, also called Fairfield Court. But Wright, in her first year, could offer guidance only at a remove. She dropped in on virtual classrooms, where students logged on from their beds or from crowded kitchen tables; often, they were not able to log on at all, because the concrete walls of their home interfered with a Wi-Fi signal. "Sometimes it was just, 'Oh, it's not working today,'" she told me.

When the students returned to the school building, Wright found that their needs were far greater than she could have imagined. Research released by Harvard and Stanford last fall found that Richmond's fourth through eighth graders had lost two full years of ground in math and nearly a year and a half in reading. Even more apparent was their difficulty with basic interactions—fifth graders hadn't been in person since third grade; second graders, since kindergarten. "Socialization with each other was huge. How to be around each other—those are building blocks for ages six to ten," Wright said. "There was a whole retraining—what does it look like when you and another student disagree? They had missed that, not being in the building."

Richmond is a particularly stark example of what education researchers say is a nationwide crisis. Student learning across the country, as measured by many assessments, has stalled to an unprecedented degree. Researchers have pointed to a number of causes, including the trauma experienced by children who lost family members to COVID, but the data generally show that the shortcomings are the greatest in districts that were slowest to reopen schools. They also show that the falloff was far greater among Black and Hispanic students than among whites and Asians, expanding disparities that had been gradually shrinking in recent decades. "This cohort of students is going to be punished throughout their lifetime," Eric Hanushek, an economist at Stanford, said, at a conference in Arlington, Virginia, in February. He presented findings demonstrating that the economic consequences of pandemic-related learning loss could be far greater than those of the Great Recession.

The federal government has sent schools a hundred and ninety billion

ILLUSTRATION BY LAURA EDELBACHER

dollars in pandemic-recovery funds, and districts are using some of that money for a range of interventions—intensive tutoring, expanded summer school, and after-school programs—though they have been hampered by the shortage of teachers and tutors. Even before the pandemic, Fairfield Court and other schools in the East End of Richmond, which has high levels of poverty, had received additional resources for social workers and for math and reading coaches; the new federal funding was used to provide an extended-day program three days a week for about forty kids. Wright appreciated the support, but she could see that more would be needed to make up the lost ground.

In Richmond, as in many other districts, the learning-loss debate has centered on time: the greatest challenge is finding extra hours for supplementary instruction. In early 2021, as it became clear that Richmond was not going to reopen its schools that spring, Jason Kamras, the superintendent of schools, shared in online forums the rudiments of a possible remedy: switching to a year-round calendar, with summer vacation limited to July, and four two-week breaks during the school year. Most students would still have a hundred and eighty school days a year, but the district would select five thousand students to receive up to forty days of extra instruction during the breaks. Teachers who volunteered to work would be paid more.

Kamras cited a report issued by staff of the Virginia legislature which indicated that, according to recent research, a year-round calendar produced varied results over all but had clear benefits for Black students. Harris Cooper, a professor of psychology at Duke, who has researched the issue, told me that, though most students suffer from a "summer slide" in math, losses in reading are bigger for students from low-income families, possibly because wealthier kids are more likely to have books around at home. He said that it made sense for districts to rethink summer break, which was a vestige of a more agricultural era and longer than in peer nations. "Our school calendar now is out of synch with the way most Americans live," he said.

Wright, a fifty-seven-year-old Black woman, was in favor of the plan. "Having those kids start instruction early, we can get those kids to really feel good about themselves," she said. "We need to have them here in the building."

Richmond's school board has been elected by voters since 1994, two years after Virginia became the last state to allow for direct election, rather than appointment, of board members, a system that now prevails in nearly all of the nation's thirteen thousand school districts. In recent years, in Florida and elsewhere, school boards have attracted attention for culture-war skirmishes over book choices and instruction about gender and sexuality, but most of them labor in relative obscurity. Supporters of elected school boards see them as safeguards of citizen input into how taxpayer dollars are spent and how children are taught, an exceptional feature of U.S. public education which embodies the principle of local control; detractors view them as bastions of dysfunction, captured by interest groups or lacking the expertise to make decisions about pedagogy. In Richmond, the board's nine members receive an annual stipend of ten thousand dollars; the chair, who is elected by the board, gets an extra thousand dollars. Meetings are held twice a month, at 6 P.M., and they often run until close to midnight, at which point public attendance, typically sparse to begin with, has dwindled to virtually nothing.

Stephanie Rizzi ran for the board in the fall of 2020. Growing up, she had bounced between her grandmother in Richmond and her mother, in Caroline County, north of the city. "I grew up poor and hungry," Rizzi said. "I can remember being thirsty, not having access to water." Her solace came at school. "My teachers saved my life," she said. She attended Virginia Commonwealth University, in Richmond, and went into education. (She is now an administrator at V.C.U.) She taught English in three counties, all the while trying to get a position in the Richmond schools, which her children attended. After being unable to get hired by the district, she decided to run for the board that oversaw it.

Among those whom she joined was Kenya Gibson. Gibson had lived in Richmond before attending graduate school in architecture at Yale; she moved back in the late two-thousands, for a job designing retail stores. She joined a local effort that was fighting for more school funding and became vice-president of the PTA at her daughter's school. When her local board seat came open in 2017, she ran for it, winning against an interim appointee who was backed by Mayor Levar Stoney and other "corporate Democrats," as Gibson came to call various politicians and business leaders, some of whom had pushed in vain to switch the city to an appointed school board, in the mid-two thousands. "It's about allowing the community to have a seat at the table," she told me. "Not having a democratically elected school board is a scary notion."

Seven of the board's nine members were Black. One of the two white members, Jonathan Young—also the only man on the board—had long been in favor of switching to a year-round calendar. Young, a faculty administrator at Virginia State University, a historically Black institution, exuded an ornery independence, striking a critical stance against Kamras even as he often sided with his administration in disputes with other members. "To be quite blunt, we're doing everything wrong," Young told me. "It's important to be able to say that the patient needs amputation, not just surgery."

After Kamras unveiled the proposed calendar, hundreds of comments were submitted to the district's online portal. At the March 15, 2021, board meeting, which was held online, Kamras's chief of staff, Michelle Hudacsko, spent two hours reading the comments aloud. Many parents and some teachers expressed their support for the new calendar as a needed response to the pandemic closures. Meghann Kennedy, a parent, said, "It would be so beneficial for our kids, who have lost so much time."

Other parents and teachers expressed opposition. Some cited practical concerns, such as the fact that they had already planned trips, camps, or second jobs for the summer. But the overriding argument was that, after the pandemic's upheaval, the district shouldn't add disruption. "What students need most this summer is normalcy—time to reach out to family they've missed, time to breathe," a teacher named Amy Brown said. "Asking more than that of teachers and kiddos is nonsense." Shannon

Dowling, a parent, said, “Our teachers have experienced trauma—they are running on fumes right now. Our families have experienced trauma. We need a break.”

After the comment session was over, Tracy Epp, the district’s chief academic officer, reminded the board just how dire the educational setback was shaping up to be. She presented the latest data on early-elementary students, which showed a large increase in the number of children who were considered at high risk of struggling to read, especially among Black and economically disadvantaged students. More than half of all first graders were at risk, up fourteen points from the previous year. “The science is clear about what it takes,” Epp said. “There’s a lot we can do during the school day, but, when we look at fifty per cent not being on track, we’ve got to find more time to tackle these literacy issues.”

“If this doesn’t alarm everyone in the city of Richmond, I don’t know what will,” Young, the male board member, said. “If this data doesn’t say that a business-as-usual calendar is inadequate, then I don’t know what would.” Several of his colleagues also expressed dismay.

Others were more sanguine. Rizzi, the former schoolteacher, said that perhaps the district needed to help parents do more at home to teach reading. “There are some small things they could do to support their kids,” she said. “This doesn’t mean kids need to be in class forever.” Gibson, the former PTA leader, cited the opposition voiced by teachers and parents, and suggested that the district instead put the money toward improving summer school in 2022: “We owe the public to say, ‘We heard you.’ ”

The meeting had been going for almost five hours. Kamras was rubbing his eyes. Finally, he suggested that, if the board wasn’t ready to switch to a year-round calendar for the coming school year, it could resolve to do so for the 2022-23 school year. “Let’s put a stake in the ground,” he said. “We have a reading crisis that is going to impact our students for the rest of their lives unless we deal with it.”

The board approved the idea, with Young the only holdout. “Congratulations, everyone,” the chairwoman, Cheryl Burke, said. “We’re going to have a traditional calendar for this school year, and then move into the 2022-23 year with added changes for year-round.”

Crossword
PAUL KARASIK
SOLUTION TO SATURDAY’S PUZZLE

Kamras had spent a summer during college working as a tutor in a housing development in Sacramento, his home town. He came away from the experience with two insights: that he really liked working with kids, and, he said, that “the third and fourth graders I was working with were every bit as capable as any other kids I’d been with, but had clearly not had the same opportunities that I’d had—and that just struck me as wrong.”

He joined Teach for America after college and started out as a middle-school math teacher in Washington, D.C. In 2005, he was named National Teacher of the Year, and shortly afterward he joined the administration of D.C.’s schools chancellor at the time, Michelle Rhee, in a role focussed on teacher recruitment and retention. In three years as chancellor, Rhee presided over rises in test scores while clashing with the teachers’ union over her efforts to cull underperforming educators.

Across the nation, the two-thousands showed steady gains for students, as measured by such tests as the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Notably, the achievement gap between Black and white students narrowed. “It’s useful to remind people that things before the pandemic were improving,” Thomas Kane, an economist at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, told me. “We had been making progress.”

Kamras became superintendent of Richmond’s schools in early 2018. The district faced challenges. For one thing, many families did not enroll their kids in its schools. The city has roughly equal shares of Black and white residents, but its public-school enrollment is sixty per cent Black, twenty-five per cent Hispanic, and ten per cent white. Still, Kamras noticed that many people who had attended Richmond Public Schools and sent their children there felt a great sense of ownership. “I was struck by how much pride there is in R.P.S.,” he told me. “It’s the engine of mobility for so many people here in the city.”

Before the pandemic, Kamras had been skeptical about a year-round calendar, but he was alarmed by the effects of virtual learning. “Three decades of gains were wiped out," he said. "You'll hear this now from elected leaders and others: 'Stop talking about the pandemic, you can't blame everything on the pandemic.' I am most certainly not, but to ignore the impact of the pandemic and the fact that it's going to have repercussions for years would be tantamount to sticking our heads in the ground."

He began to see year-round school in a new light. For one thing, it seemed more workable than adding hours to the school day, given how drained many teachers felt at dismissal time. And it avoided the drawbacks of a long break for struggling students. Kane, at Harvard, noted that traditional summer school is often insufficient, because it's typically voluntary and plagued by low attendance rates. Although paying teachers and staff for additional weeks of work was an added expense, extending the year was logistically easier than other supplements, such as hiring a whole new corps of outside tutors. "We already have the school buildings and the teachers," Kane said.

"I shifted and said, 'There may not be any better time than now to rip the Band-Aid off,'" Kamras told me. "No, it may not be perfect, but we're going to be dealing with the impact of the closure for years to come."

But, in the fall of 2021, some members of the school board started wavering about the year-round calendar. On November 15th, Kamras presented to the board several options—one with the same number of school days as the status quo, plus extra days for certain students, and others with ten extra days for all students. The most expansive option would cost roughly thirteen million dollars a year in additional pay for teachers and staff, to come from the district's federal recovery funds. The plan was to hold a public survey on the options.

Kamras was taken aback when several board members declared that the survey should have another option, too: the status quo. Gibson said that changing the calendar would spur teachers to quit, and that it was unfair to students. "We're basically merging school into a full-time job," she said. "It's not right that Black and brown students in our district are chained to their desks essentially further into the school year while their counterparts in the counties get to play and have a summer."

Kamras noted that the calendar would still have a six-week summer break, but several members were unmoved. "I wonder if there's a way to address summer learning loss without adding days or going to year-round," Rizzi said. "Is there some kind of way that we can take a creative approach and try something that isn't going to feel like an extra job for our parents and our children?"

Kamras replied that he was simply following the directive of the board's vote for a year-round calendar. He spoke with the tone of forced agreeableness that often characterized his contentious exchanges with the board. "I do believe that coming out of the pandemic we do owe our students more," he said. "I do believe this is the right direction for this school division to go. I do believe this was what I was directed to do by the board."

The survey went out with the status quo as an option, and it received the most votes, with higher support from white families than from Black ones. Kamras presented the results on January 10, 2022, in the midst of another challenge: keeping schools open during the Omicron wave. A week later, he proposed a traditional calendar for the coming year.

Young was the only board member to vote against the traditional calendar. "This board, when it punted on an alternative to the status quo, said that we would adopt it for the next school year," he said. "That, I presume, did not mean anything when it was said."

Recently, I asked Rizzi, who is now the chair of the board, about the change, and she said that her vote in the spring of 2021 was not to approve a year-round calendar but simply to study it further. She had doubted that it would actually happen, given resistance from teachers and their union, the Richmond Education Association. "I knew that the R.E.A. was mobilizing against it, and that there was going to be a lot of pushback, and teachers wouldn't want it," she said. "It wasn't that we would definitely support it next year, it was that we would return to discuss it."

Across the country, other school districts were also grappling with how to add more instructional time. Atlanta added thirty minutes to the school day. Los Angeles added four days to the

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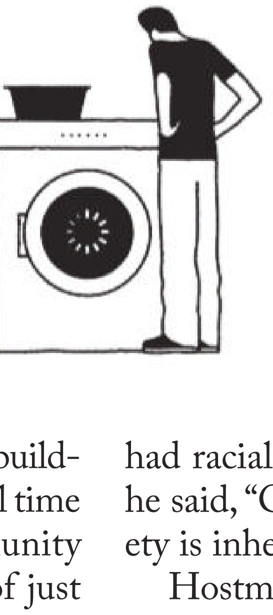
school year, which it said would be optional for both students and teachers, with extra pay for teachers who took part; the teachers' union objected, saying that it fell outside their contract agreement, and participation by students ended up being very low. Dallas had more success: it gave schools the option of adding up to twenty-one days for selected students, and forty-one schools, roughly one in eight, decided to do so. Five others opted for an extended-year calendar for the whole school. Hopewell, which is half an hour south of Richmond and has a majority-Black student population of slightly more than four thousand, became the first district in the state to institute a sweeping year-round calendar, in 2021. In Dallas, the schools with the added days showed slightly larger learning gains; Hopewell has reported lower rates of teacher turnover now that there are more breaks throughout the year.

Other districts have gone in the opposite direction: cutting down on classroom time in the name of safeguarding student and staff mental health, an explicit priority of some of the federal funding. Spokane, for example, reduced students' classroom time partly to give teachers more time for professional development. Marguerite Roza, a Georgetown University research professor of education policy, was sharply critical of this approach. "How can you believe that less school is an intervention for learning recovery?" she said. "You can't imagine that *less* school is the remedy for having all that learning interruption. The kids aren't even there."

Dan Goldhaber, the director of the Center for Education Data & Research at the University of Washington, told me that one challenge to building support for added instructional time is that parents and other community members are not always aware of just how steep the drop-off has been, in part because many schools have been grading more leniently in recognition of the pandemic's challenges. "There's a real urgency gap," he said. "It's asymmetry between what we can see empirically about where kids are and what parents think, based on opinion surveys. There's the belief that kids are doing O.K., and the desire to snap back to normal. And that's problematic, because normal seems to have gotten us back to the pre-pandemic pace of test-score growth, but the pre-pandemic pace does not make up for the pandemic, and we need to be on a much higher trajectory." An analysis of data from about eighty per cent of public schools in the country has found that, in districts that went remote for ninety per cent or more of 2020-21, the decline in math scores represented the loss of two-thirds of a year, nearly double the drop in districts that were remote for less than ten per cent of the year. And these numbers don't take into account the millions of students who have vanished from the rolls entirely since the extended hiatus during which the norm of attending school eroded.

Roza detected a more depressing factor contributing to the urgency gap: people have simply grown inured to talk of underachieving schools. "The system has always had some kids failing, and now we have more," she said. "There's maybe a numbness to it."



Recently, I spoke with a newly elected member of the executive board of the Richmond teachers' union, Melvin Hostman, who said that it was hard to agree to Kamras's push for additional instructional time when there were so many other problems that needed to be addressed: lack of toilet paper, school buses arriving late, and widespread absenteeism among them. He added, "The whole thing about learning loss I found funny is that, if everyone was out of school, and everyone had learning loss, then aren't we all equal? We all have a deficit." When I noted data showing that the loss had had racially disproportionate impacts, he said, "Of course—because our society is inherently unequal."

Hostman, who is in his sixth year of teaching high-school history, said that what bothered him and his colleagues was that the pandemic had laid bare how much in society had been broken for a long time, making it possible to reorder things in a dramatic way: "Now people are saying, 'We're going back to the way things were before.' But we didn't *like* the way things were before." He didn't see extending the school year as a new approach: "They're taking the weird policymaker position that what we're doing isn't working, so we need to do more of it." He offered additional insight into why teachers were suffering low morale now that they were back in the building. As hard as remote learning was, he said, "there are many teachers who feel like the only time they had a work-life balance acceptable to them was during virtual school." Teachers had been able to work from home, and many districts had cut back class hours to reduce screen time, giving teachers more flexibility to run errands, exercise, and walk their dogs, just like other professionals doing remote work.

Now teachers were back in school daily, still cramming in class prep during their few empty periods, still bringing a lot of work home at night while many of their professional peers were enjoying hybrid schedules. "An industry that functions only because of additional labor that's unpaid is trying to get people to return to that," Hostman said. "And it's difficult."

A year after the defeat of the year-round calendar, Kamras decided to try again. His relations with the board had grown increasingly strained: In August, 2022, after the latest state test scores showed the district doing even worse in math and science than it had the year before, there was speculation that the board might vote to fire him. Mayor Stoney, who is Black, had strongly backed year-round school, and he urged the board not to act rashly, saying that firing Kamras just before the start of the school year would be "catastrophic." "No one should be surprised that prolonged virtual learning and the trauma of the pandemic would negatively impact academic outcomes," he tweeted. "It's why Superintendent @JasonKamras wisely proposed a year-round academic calendar. The School Board dismissed his proposal."

This time, Kamras moved more incrementally. At a meeting this January, he told principals that he was launching a pilot program in which a few schools could adopt an extended calendar, adding twenty days by ending summer vacation in late July.

"SHOULD I CRACK OPEN THE '87 NOW AND LET IT BREATHE A LITTLE?"

Under the terms of the pilot, which emerged a few weeks later, teachers at participating schools would receive a ten-thousand-dollar bonus and some additional salary, plus five thousand dollars more if their school attained certain metrics. The total cost would be a little more than a million dollars per school. A school could participate only if it had strong support from staff and parents. Kamras invited principals to apply; he would then winnow the list of candidates to a handful, after which principals would survey their school community to gauge receptiveness.

Angela Wright seized on the idea. The social dislocations from the pandemic were still pervasive, and included heightened levels of violence in and around the city's schools, and frequent alerts from a monitoring system on students' laptops that was used to detect threats to other students or to themselves. In mid-October, a seventeen-year-old boy was found in a garbage can in the Fairfield Court housing development, fatally shot. "There maybe are some schools that don't need those twenty days," Wright told me. "But we know that, for some of our kids, having that whole summer out—it would have been better if they had been in a safe learning environment, so they can prosper."

Allison El Koubi, the principal at Westover Hills Elementary, south of the James River, was also interested. Westover Hills had a lower rate of student poverty than Fairfield Court did, but it, too, had suffered steep drop-offs in achievement, in addition to a brush with violence: in October, a woman had been fatally shot during an altercation just outside the school shortly before afternoon dismissal; a teen-ager was later charged with the killing.

Like Wright, El Koubi saw the pilot program as an opportunity to build stability. "We had this huge disruption, we're seeing increased levels of trauma in students and more need for social-emotional learning, and there's not enough time," she told me. "Students with additional challenges can learn the same amount in a year as their higher-income peers, but they tend to lose more in the summer, and that gap just keeps widening every year." She also saw the pilot as a way for teachers to earn more money. "When I heard about how much the increase in salary or bonus would be, I thought, This is too big a decision to make on my own," she said. "I want our staff to have a possibility to weigh in on it."

Both principals applied for the pilot. Wright began gradually building support with her staff, but El Koubi, under the impression that principals weren't supposed to publicize the proposal until Kamras settled on a list of candidates, held off.

On January 31st, the local CBS affiliate, WTVR, reported that Kamras had chosen four candidates for the pilot, including Fairfield Court and Westover Hills. The news caught teachers and staff at Westover Hills off guard, and many of them recoiled from the idea. In a straw poll conducted two days later, only thirty-seven per cent of employees said that they were interested in learning more about the pilot. "When it came out in such a jarring way, that created a lot of strong feelings about it immediately," El Koubi said. "It felt like it was just too much." She removed the school from the pilot. One teacher told me, "The thought is good—that we're trying to combat whatever we lose from the students being gone so long in the summer—but the idea being brought so quickly was a tad bit too hasty." He went on, "When you're told that you have to work harder when you already work as hard as you possibly can, day to day, it's not necessarily what you want to hear."

At Fairfield Court, Wright charged ahead. She held a string of sessions with small groups of teachers and staff to explain the program. Together, the educators looked at the data showing the drop-off that kids had suffered during the summer of 2022, losing much of what they had gained the prior year, and started imagining better outcomes. It was "everybody believing in the same dream that we needed to move kids to the next level," Wright said. "We all have to believe in our kids—that we can be successful in doing this." All but two staff members voted for the pilot, so she was able to start surveying parents.

Wright also needed support from the school board, which would get a final say on the pilot. On February 6th, Giordana Buffo, a teacher at Fairfield Court, came to a board meeting to testify on behalf of the proposal. "Yes, this extended school year will come with some challenges for me personally, as well as many other teachers," she said. "But, in the end, I feel like it would be beneficial to the academic success of our students, and help mitigate some of the learning loss that many of our students face when they're not in school for an extended period of time."

Wright spoke a few minutes later, praising Fairfield Court as the "hidden gem in the East End." She told the board about the data showing that the gains her students make during the year are often lost over the summer. "When we create the opportunity for underprivileged scholars to overcome disadvantages and find success, it levels the playing field," she said.

The next speaker was Anne Forrester, a middle-school teacher on the union's collective-bargaining team, who, a couple of months later, was elected chapter vice-president. She warned the board that the pilot might be "wasted money." "This proposal for a two-hundred-day calendar, it might work, sure," she said. "But, to me, it doesn't make sense to do that until we've gotten our schools up to where they need to be. You're putting an addition on a house that has a leaky roof."

One Tuesday in late February, I visited the Fairfield Court housing development. A few days earlier, the district had announced that schools would be closed that day, to align with surrounding suburban counties that were closing for a special congressional election. The day before had been Presidents' Day, making for an unexpected four-day weekend. It was warm, and kids were milling around on the stoops and in the courtyards of the development, a collection of well-worn two-story brick buildings.

The mothers and grandmothers whom I spoke with were in favor of a year-round calendar and the two-hundred-day pilot, casting it in terms of common sense: kids had lost a lot during the pandemic, their summer break was longer than in much of the rest of the world, and they didn't have enough to do during it. "Other countries don't do it the way we do it, and we're consistently falling back on our education," Octavia Bell, whose three daughters were in middle and high school, said. "You don't have to reinvent the wheel if you see something working somewhere else."

I spoke with several women on the next block who among them had about a dozen grandchildren in city schools. When I asked about the argument, made by some parents, that the shorter summer break would interfere with family trips, they scoffed, saying that few people in Fairfield Court could afford to go anywhere. Other parents "are too busy worrying about what they're going to do when the kids are in school," Diane Hicks-Taylor said. " 'Well, I had plans, I wanted to do this and do that.' No, let the kids go to school!"

When it came time for Wright to survey Fairfield Court parents, she approached the task like an election campaign, reaching out to parents anywhere she could: at a coffee hour outside school, at an awards ceremony, at a soul-food lunch. She had staff call the parents who still hadn't voted. In the end, ninety per cent of families voted in favor of the two-hundred-day pilot. The twenty-one remaining families were told that they would be able to transfer to another school if they wanted.

On March 6th, Wright came back before the board to tell its members about the survey results and watch them vote on the pilot. Kenya Gibson, the former PTA leader, said that she opposed it, because she wasn't sure how it would be funded after the federal money ran out. Kamras replied that, if the pilot showed success, the city could seek funding from the state or other sources to expand it.

Only two members voted no: Gibson and a woman named Mariah White. After two years of efforts to expand instructional time, the board had finally approved such a move for one of its fifty-four schools. Two weeks later, the board approved the pilot for Cardinal Elementary, which has a heavily Spanish-speaking population. This time, Rizzi voted against it, saying that she shared Gibson's concerns about whether the bonuses for teachers at the pilot schools violated their collective-bargaining agreement. The fourth of Kamras's original candidate schools, Overby-Sheppard Elementary, was deemed to have insufficient family support.

All told, only about a thousand of the district's twenty-two thousand students will return to school in late July.

After the votes, Rizzi elaborated on her resistance. " 'Learning loss' is largely a subjective term," she told me. "Working to standardize our kids at any point in their learning process is an artificial exercise. So we experienced this pandemic, and some of our students aren't performing as well from a standardized perspective. Characterizing it as learning loss looks at it from a deficit perspective. We should be looking at it as where we are now, and go from there."

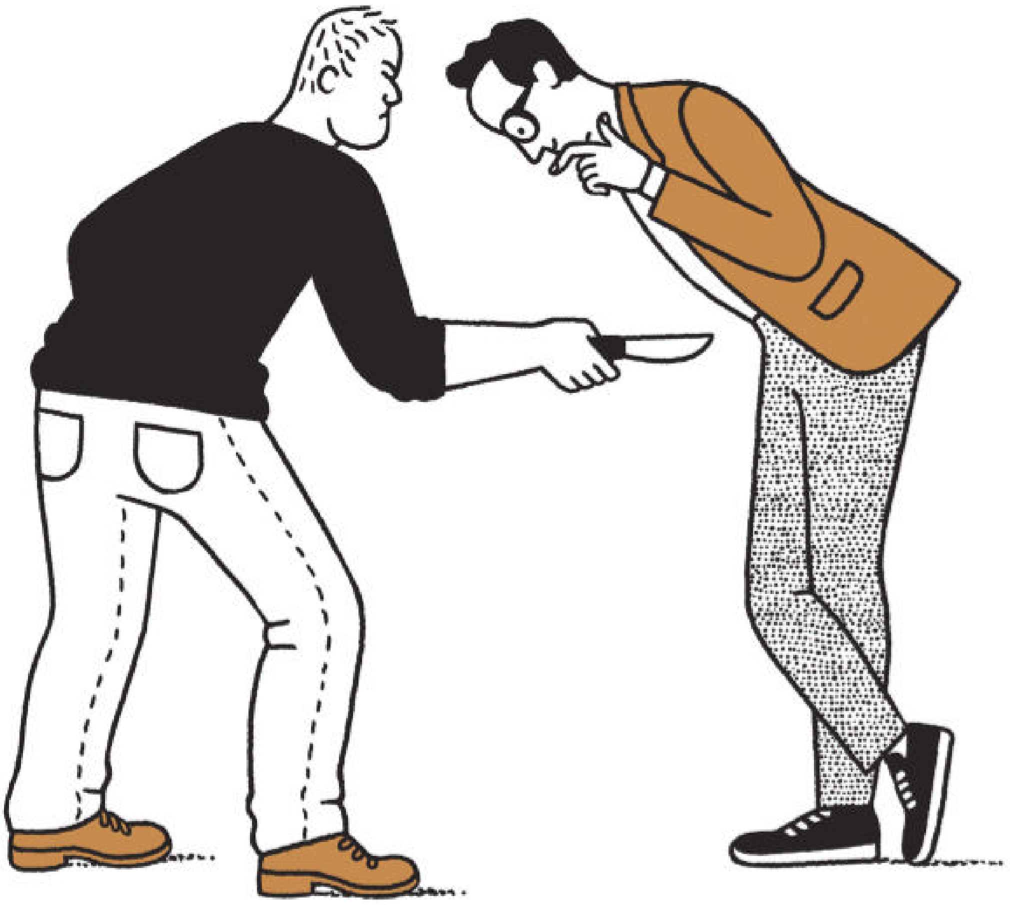
The day after the vote on the Fairfield Court pilot, I got a tour from Wright. The school was a hive of activity, and a reminder of how much beyond academic instruction is provided by many schools: in one room, children were getting free eyeglasses; another group was off at a pool having free swim lessons. In a kindergarten classroom, a teacher was helping her students to count to a hundred, while, in the hallway outside, a reading coach was huddled with some second graders who had been pulled out for extra help.

In her office, Wright talked excitedly about the school's detailed plans for the extra twenty days, which will begin on July 24th. "This is not just about growth, it's about accelerating to the next level," she said. "We want students to be a hundred-per-cent proficient. We want kids to continue pushing through the ceiling."

Later, I visited Westover Hills, where Allison El Koubi told me about the things that she had hoped to accomplish during the pilot. The next day, she informed her staff that she was leaving her job as principal at the end of the year. Her departure would prove unexpectedly abrupt: On June 6th, a shooting outside the graduation ceremony for one of the city's high schools killed a graduate and his stepfather, and wounded five other people; police arrested a nineteen-year-old man. The district closed schools for the remainder of the week, ending the year several days early.

After speaking with El Koubi, I asked parents picking up their kids if they had been disappointed that the pilot hadn't proceeded. One mother, Alanna Scott, said she hadn't really seen the point of extending the year to make up for what children lost in the pandemic. "It's past now," she said. "Whatever they know, they should keep rolling with it. The kids don't know what they missed." ◆

SHOUTS & MURMURS



LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

READING BODY LANGUAGE LIKE THE EXPERTS

BY COLIN NISSAN

We can understand so much about what people are communicating by simply paying attention to their physical cues. Let's say that you're walking down the street and pass a guy who raises his arm in the air, then swings a knife at you. Body-language-wise, he wants to stab you.

Or how about if you're at work, and your boss calls you into her office, then takes a swipe at you with a knife? Well, that's already two people who have tried to take you out.

Maybe you're on a first date and the person seems pretty great so far. You're starting to feel a physical attraction toward her but aren't sure if it's mutual, because she's not waggling her tongue back at you, and it's been more than a minute.

Another scenario: You're at dinner, and someone at the table next to yours stands up, red-faced, and starts pounding his chest with his fist. At first, you assume that he must be choking. But after taking a minute to think more critically about his body language—he's dead now. Don't be afraid to trust your first instinct with this stuff.

Your eyebrows alone can communicate more than you realize. One raised eyebrow means that you're intrigued, while two raised eyebrows means that you're surprised, and no eyebrows means that you're in Blue Man Group.

Blink too much at the poker table, and people might suspect that you have a great hand. Blink too little, and they might start to wonder if something is wrong, because the rest of you isn't moving, either. Lucky for you, one of the other players has the presence of mind to call 911. A quick CAT scan shows that you had a neurological episode, which the doctor later explains is just a fancy term for a stroke, or mini-stroke, in your case. Either way, if it had been left untreated, it could have been bad. Like, bad-bad.

To bond with someone, you may find yourself unconsciously mirroring his body language. When he shrugs, you shrug. He flips his hair; you flip yours. He says, "Stop that"; you say, "Stop that." He says, "I'm an idiot." You say, "I'm an idiot"—and that's how quickly you can get burned by body language.

When your seatmate on a plane hogs the armrest, she is using body language to assert dominance. Though it's not exactly the same, there are some animal species that display this behavior in the wild with their armrests.

What if you're out on an investigation and knock on a suspect's door to ask a few questions? You'll need to read the suspect's body language to see if he's telling you the truth. Is the knife in his hand shaking because he's nervous about something? He'll be reading you, too, so it won't be long before he figures out that you're not really a cop, and that you made your badge out of a soup can.

If your parents and siblings go away on vacation and leave you home alone to fend off a couple of bumbling thieves, all you can really do in terms of body language is place your hands on your cheeks and make a face like *What am I supposed to do here? I'm eight.*

Smiling is a powerful nonverbal tool. It's a way of saying, "I'm really happy for you, Alex. Like, genuinely happy that you moved on, because you're a good person, and we both knew this wasn't working. It wasn't a me thing or a you thing, it was an us thing. So I guess what I'm trying to say is, Good for you for bringing a date to our friend's wedding two weeks after we broke up, you fucking sociopath."

When you're at Burger King and order a Whopper Jr., then see that they charged you for a regular Whopper, there has to be some great body language you could use there.

As helpful as body language can be with stabbings, it's not an exact science. In fact, it's not a science at all—it's a language, and like all languages it can be misinterpreted. If you've ever asked where the bathroom is in Spanish and ended up getting a colonoscopy, you know exactly what I mean. ♦

ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

SHOW OF SUPPORT

Is the Army Tactical Bra ready for deployment?

BY PATRICIA MARX

For the first time, the U.S. Army is testing four "Concept" bras for female soldiers.

Last summer, with the momentousness of a gender-reveal party and the exuberance of a ticker-tape parade, the United States Army announced its first combat-ready bra to the world. They called it the Army Tactical Brassiere (a.k.a. the A.T.B.). Conceived four years ago, the garment is still being tinkered with, but one day it will be a wardrobe staple for all women in the Army. David Accetta, the chief public-affairs officer for the research division developing the undergarment, the DEVCOM Soldier Center ("DEVCOM" stands for U.S. Army Combat Capabilities Development Command), told *Army Times* that, if the brassiere is officially approved by the Army Uniform Board, "we would see that as a win for female soldiers." Ashley Cushon, the project engineer of the team working on the item, assured me that it would "reduce the cognitive burden on the wearer." And a military Web site reported that the A.T.B. would improve "overall soldier performance and lethality." Gadzooks! Yes, it's flame-resistant, but what else can it do? Shoot bullets? Hypnotize the enemy? Turn its wearer invisible?

I decided that I needed to try on The Bra. Full disclosure: there is no undergarment in the world that would gird my loins enough to prepare me for combat. I shy away from quarrels; I am afraid of bear spray. Clothes and gear, however, are another story, and, surprisingly, we owe many of the things that we wear and use every day to the military: beanies, cargo pants, T-shirts, trenchcoats, and aviator glasses—and can we agree that sanitary napkins count as gear? Duct tape, Cheetos, and Silly Putty all have military origins.

At ten hundred hours, on a cold morning in March, I arrived at the seventy-eight-acre Soldier System Center, a military installation in Natick, Massachusetts, west of Boston, to meet The Bra. At the first of two security gates, I was greeted by Accetta. (Tip: If you can't arrange for a vetted Trusted Traveler escort, as I did, you'll need to bring two I.D.s. Your draft record or your Defense Biometric Identification will work.) Accetta and I trudged down Upper Entrance Lane, past yellow plastic crash barriers plastered with such aphorisms as "People First" and "Winning Matters," until we reached Building 4, MacArthur Hall, C.C.D.C. (a.k.a. DEVCOM) Soldier Center. (Accetta said, "I'm convinced there's an acronym generator at D.O.D.") Whoever names these organizations must get paid by the word.

The original purpose of DEVCOM Soldier Center, which was founded as the Quartermaster Research Facility, in 1949, was to update equipment that had proved tragically inadequate during the Second World War. For instance, the tents. They might have fared fine if the war had taken place in Santa Barbara, California, in May, indoors. In the muggy South Pacific jungle, though, the fabric succumbed to mildew and disintegrated after two weeks. Soldiers wearing uninsulated boots when they invaded the Aleutian Islands sustained more injuries from trench foot and exposure than they did from enemy fire.

The Soldier Center's purview these days includes not just textiles and uniforms but shelters, airdrop systems, weaponry, and food. Projects have included a uniform that can change color and one that would enable troops to leap over twenty-foot walls; a courage pill; an "instant chapel," which can be parachuted into war zones and which contains camouflage-patterned Jewish prayer shawls and compasses that point toward Mecca; a prototype for a protein bar (but doused with kerosene to insure that a soldier would eat it only in an emergency); and, as part of a

ILLUSTRATION BY ANNA HAIFISCH

pest-control experiment in 1974, irradiated cockroaches, which (whoops) escaped from garbage bags in the town dump and invaded homes—a screwup that required six months of repeated DDT and chlordane spraying to fix.

Today, the Soldier Center's labs are more Willy Wonka-ish than ever. There are two climate chambers—one designated Tropics, the other Arctic—which can re-create just about any environment on earth in order to test products and the responses of human beings. Want to have your vitals monitored while you cycle on a stationary bike with forty-m.p.h. winds gusting your way, at temperatures of up to a hundred and sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit? You can do it here. Copper mannequins equipped with more than a hundred sensors are used to test hopefully protective garments, to see how soldiers would weather flash-fire scenarios similar to those resulting from an I.E.D. And, in Building 36, the Combat Feeding Division food-research people are concocting an assortment of meals in tubes—caffeinated chocolate pudding and truffle macaroni and cheese—to be consumed through straws jutting from ports in helmets. Each M.R.E.—meal ready-to-eat—is topped off with xylitol-enriched chewing gum to replace teeth brushing.

But lunch could wait (it'll remain edible for three years). It was time for Accetta and me to report to the Design Pattern Prototype Shop and meet Ashley Cushon, The Bra's designer, and Annette LaFleur, the team leader in charge of Army uniforms. Both had on chic black civvies. LaFleur's group is made up of ten clothing designers and an industrial designer, none of whom have a military background. (Their experience includes fashion illustration, bridal couture, and sportswear design.) "We develop everything from dress uniforms to Arctic Protection Systems to body armor," LaFleur said, as she showed me the studio. Around the room, headless mannequins modelled camo-patterned prototypes. The first one I saw was the I.H.W.C.U.-F. (Improved Hot Weather Combat Uniform—Female). One of the tailoring adjustments made to accommodate women's bodies, an accompanying poster bewilderingly explained, is "a pen pocket shifted to allow for elbow bend." I coveted an oversized jacket-and-suspendered-trousers combo in umber canvas, but it is meant for smoke jumpers—firefighters who parachute into hot spots and need protection both for landing and from biochemical gases.

Across from the firefighters, another mannequin showed off the new physical-fitness getup for pregnant soldiers—shorts with an expandable waist and a jacket capable of swelling. Workout wear for expectant servicewomen is a recent development. Maternity work uniforms (formal and combat) have been around since 1980, created to address complaints that the unsightly appearance of pregnant servicewomen wearing ill-fitting clothes was lowering troop morale. (Since the nineteen-seventies, it has been unconstitutional to kick a woman out of the military for being pregnant.) Laid out on a nearby table was an olive-drab top with a liftable panel, next to a museum-like label reading "Nursing T-Shirt."

On to the A.T.B.! Just inside the door to the studio, four fibreglass dummies with perky, igloo-shaped breasts posed unabashedly in sturdy-looking black brassieres paired with black nylon Army Physical Fitness Uniform sweatpants. Each was different and represented what the design team calls a Concept. Concept A is a pullover style with padded cups; B is a "shelf style" pull-on with a racer back; Concepts C and D have cross-back straps. C has adjustable compression—the one to choose if you like the feel of a boa constrictor wrapped around your bust. D, with its zipper-front closure and contoured seams running parabolically under each breast, would befit a superhero who's looking to zip into action lickety-split.

All four resemble the kinds of sports bras sold at Lululemon, but there are differences. These are fire-resistant, whereas the ones you can buy in stores are basically Duraflame logs spun into fabric. A.T.B.s are made of proprietary compression-knit fibres designed to wick moisture and dry quickly. Another feature of the Army Tactical Bra is that it's tactical. "'Tactical' covers anything you wear in combat or training for combat," Cushon said. "So you have to consider how the A.T.B.'s hardware and seaming placement is affected by other clothing items."

Among the challenges that the designers at Maidenform do not face: how to insure that a soldier's intimate apparel will remain intact after a hundred launderings, since mending is tricky when you are being shot at. For this reason, many of the garments have double closures—a zipper plus generic Velcro, say. However, according to LaFleur, "the really complex part is sizing. We strive to fit the fifth through the ninety-fifth percentile of our population, which is quite different from a private company that manufactures to a select target market." In 2012, the Army collected body measurements from four thousand and eighty-two male and a thousand nine hundred and eighty-six female soldiers, through the U.S. Army Anthropometric Survey. LaFleur and her team use this data when designing uniforms. (The information was made public in 2017, and now you, too, can know the number of centimetres in the average "ball of foot circumference" or "ear breadth" or "tenth rib height.")

But the A.T.B. team wanted to know more. So they authorized the Soldier Center's consumer-research team, which includes a psychologist, to craft a questionnaire that was sent to eighteen thousand female soldiers, asking them what they needed in a bra.

What did they find out? LaFleur told me she was sorry, but that information was hush-hush. I begged. At last, I was given a few nuggets from their findings: namely, some female soldiers bind their breasts with adhesive tape or Ace bandages to reduce bounciness; others buy sports bras a size smaller than usual or wear two or three bras at once to increase support. Pretty much everyone wants a black bra, because it won't show dirt and grime.

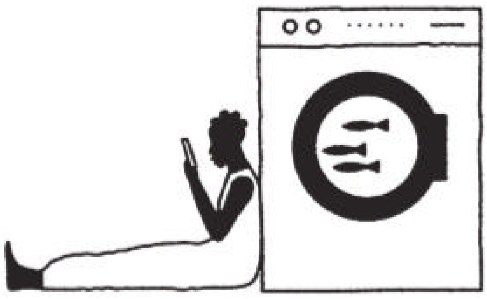
The idea of an Army bra was first broached in 2018, when Cushon tried to develop the Biometric Algorithm Monitoring Brassiere (BAMBI), which would not only keep bosoms in place but would use built-in sensors to monitor physiological changes in the wearer. The high-tech performance undergarment had the potential to tell you if you were tired. It was a non-starter.

I asked when she thought the A.T.B. might be included in the clothing bag issued to enlisting soldiers. As soon as various tweaks were made, she said, the bras would undergo testing. What sort of tweaks? "We're considering decreasing the amount of loft in the spacer knit to make the design lower profile," she said. Translation: make the fabric less thick. After the "user evaluations" are analyzed, The Bra will be fielded (Armyspeak for "distributed"). But, she added, that action falls under the domain of Soldier Protective Equipment at Fort Belvoir, near Alexandria, Virginia.

If you are curious, as I was, why Cushon and her team didn't make the A.T.B. bulletproof, it is because that would be superfluous. When a soldier is in harm's way, the brassiere would be worn under a nearly invincible fortress of finery. "We've gotten pretty good at the science of stopping bullets. To do it with as little weight as possible, that's the challenge," Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Miller, the product manager of Soldier Protective Equipment at Fort Belvoir, told me when I visited the base. Except for underwear, his jurisdiction encompasses "pretty much everything that touches a soldier's body," he said, including Integrated Head Protection Systems (helmets, duh). I also met with Major Kim Pierre-Zamora, who specializes in body armor.

In a conference room, I was allowed to play dress-up, trying on one green or greige piece of clothing on top of another, lasagna style. (In the Army, layering is a way to add or subtract protective pieces.) The first component I put on was the Ballistic Combat Shirt—Female, a tight-fitting, camo-patterned long-sleeved top that made me feel and look as if I were wearing a trendy straitjacket from the Marquis de Sade's 1944 spring collection. "This is the only female-specific item in the kit," Pierre-Zamora said, explaining that it's a "variant of the male—excuse me, unisex—shirt. We are gender-agnostic, but we didn't want to keep giving the female soldiers mediums, and just say, 'Hey, go deal with it.'"

The B.C.S.-F., she explained, is customized with "side bust protection," "a sweep in the waist to account for women who may have more curves," and "shorter sleeves to account for the female form." It also has a U-shaped notch along the back of the neck, a feature designed for women wearing ponytails but which is now built into the unisex shirt as well, since it turns out that men, too, prefer not to have what Pierre-Zamora called "a big piece of soft ballistics stabbing them in the neck." In 2021, the military revamped its hair regulations, and it is now permissible to keep hair in buns, twists, cornrows, braids, and ponytails, as long as it does not extend past the shoulder blades while a soldier is standing at attention; hair can be cut as short as she desires. Also acceptable are "solid lip and nail colors (non-extreme)." F.Y.I.: Nail shapes such as coffin, ballerina, and stiletto are forbidden; men are now allowed to wear clear nail polish.



Next, I Velcroed the Yoke and Collar Attachment snugly around my throat, and then ripped it off, because breathing is important to me. The pièce de résistance, literally, is the Modular Scalable Vest with pockets (front, back, and sides), into which armor plates can be inserted. Since 2018, it has come in eight sizes, three of them engineered for "small-statured individuals," Miller explained. "Those sizes were purposely built for females, based on our anthropomorphic data, but we use the unisex label so that men are not discouraged from wearing those sizes."

Finally, I stepped into the Blast Pelvic Protector, a pair of open-sided camo shorts that look like a Pampers product. As Pierre-Zamora put it, these "safeguard against underfoot blast and offer nine-mil protection right here at home plate for your reproductive organs." To complete the ensemble, I donned a rucksack. (The donning required two assistants and took many minutes.) About thirty-five pounds heavier, I did the only thing I was capable of: I sat down. (Fact that will change the way you watch war movies: the average infantryman kitted up for a three-day mission carries a hundred and eighteen pounds of equipment.)

Back in Natick, I asked to try on The Bra. If you think Victoria has a secret, wait until you encounter the wall of obfuscation put up by the U.S. Army. "I worry the fit accuracy won't be there," Cushon said warily, warning me that, in such a case, "your comments would not be valid."

LaFleur was just as evasive. "It may feel one way when you try it on but differently if you train in it," she said, and offered a compromise: "Would it be O.K. just to take them off the mannequins so you can look at their construction?"

While the armed forces pondered my request, I dove into some historical research. The first American soldier ever to wear a bra-like thingamajig, I discovered, was Robert Shurtleff, who joined the Light Infantry Company of the 4th Massachusetts Regiment in 1782 as an élite fighter. Shurtleff served for seventeen months before losing consciousness in Philadelphia from a fever. The doctor who treated him discovered that he was a she—Deborah Sampson—who'd bound her breasts with a linen cloth. Women were not allowed, and Sampson's stint in the Continental Army ended.

Women didn't enter the military officially until 1901, and then only through a back door, when the Army Nurse Corps was founded. Those first nurses, about a hundred of them, were virginally attired in long, high-necked white dresses. The first woman to legally enlist in the military was Loretta Perfectus Walsh, who joined the Navy Reserves as a chief yeoman in 1917; in the next few years, she was followed by eleven thousand other female yeomen. The title makes it sound as if these women would at least be swabbing the deck while ducking artillery fire, but the yeomen—or yeomanettes, as they were called—mostly performed secretarial duties, although a few became switchboard operators (called Hello Girls) and fingerprint experts. There was no uniform for the women, but Walsh found a man's jacket and improvised. In a photo, grinning triumphantly as she salutes, she's wearing a wide-brimmed hat, a white shirt, and a neckerchief tied in a bow, looking like the world's happiest Girl Scout leader.

I contacted Tanya Roth, the author of "Her Cold War: Women in the U.S. Military, 1945-1980," who Zoomed with me from her house, in St. Louis. "When World War II hits, that's when things get interesting," she said. On July 1, 1943, women became full-fledged members of the Army, after Franklin Roosevelt signed legislation that changed the name of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) to the Women's Army Corps (WAC) and endowed it with all the privileges and benefits of its male counterpart. This included snazzier uniforms. A hundred and fifty thousand women dutifully signed up during the war, mainly working clerical jobs, and they looked pretty swell while doing them. Others worked in munitions factories, doing jobs formerly held by men. To protect them, the eyewear company Willson Goggles manufactured the Saf-t-Bra, a plastic contraption that fit over breasts like a pair of conjoined hard hats.

In 1942, *Vogue* quoted a male soldier saying of his female counterparts, "To look unattractive these days is downright 'morale-breaking and should be considered treason.'" The next year, that magazine carried an ad naming women in uniform the "Best Dressed Women in the World Today." The government asked Elizabeth Arden to concoct a lipstick to match the red piping on women's Marine Corps uniforms. Women marines were issued this Montezuma Red lipstick and matching nail polish in their official military kits. (It remained mandatory for thirty more years.) A Tangee cosmetics ad from the era reasoned, "No lipstick—ours or anyone else's—will win the war. But it symbolizes one of the reasons we are fighting . . . the precious right of women to be feminine and lovely, under any circumstances."

It seemed to symbolize something else, too. During the war, rumors circulated that women in the military were either lesbians or hussies. In 1943, a syndicated newspaper column, "Capitol Stuff," claimed that Wacs were given free condoms. (They weren't, but men were.) To counter the rumors, the Army needed to get out the message that women in the armed forces were both feminine and wholesome. The Wac director, Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby, ordered her recruits "to avoid rough or masculine appearance which would cause unfavorable public comment."

Roth explained that, although the military used patriotism as a lure to recruit women during the war, after it was over, they had "to sell it by making the women look good." In 1950, the Women's Army Corps hired the fashion designer Hattie Carnegie to create six new uniforms for servicewomen. When they were débuted, in a fashion show on Governors Island, the *Times* noted the apparel's "feminine charm in cut and silhouette," the "pleasing taupe tone," the "trim round collars [that] take the place of masculine revers," and the "high belt" that lends the slacks "a well-defined and snug waistline." And the hats! "What a difference! With her light touch, Miss Carnegie provided them with a downward tilt to the right side of the brim and had the insignia placed at the right instead of squarely in the front."

The advent of the A.T.B. isn't the first time the Army and a bra have been seen together in headlines. In 1957, when Lieutenant Jeane Wolcott first inspected her unit of Wacs, in Yokohama, Japan, she felt that ninety-five of her ninety-six recruits lacked a feminine je ne sais quoi. Her fix? Falsies, along with girdles and shoulder pads, and, in a few cases, mandatory visits to a diet doctor. One editorial cartoonist called the incident the "Battle of the Bulge."

According to Roth, it wasn't until the nineties, during Operation Desert Storm, that the way a woman's uniform functions became more important than the way it looks. More than forty thousand women took part in that war. In 2016, all occupations and positions in the military were finally open to women. Most significant, women were no longer restricted from any jobs that dealt specifically with battle.

Today, more than seventeen per cent of the country's armed forces is female. I talked to a handful of them over Zoom to find out how excited they might be about the imminent arrival of the tactical bra. None had heard of it. From the U.S. Army garrison in Grafenwöhr, Germany, a first lieutenant and artillery adviser to an infantry unit said, "If I could wear pink to work and look like a girl, that would be my preference, but I understand it's the Army and that's not an option." I asked her what advice she would give the A.T.B. designers. "I'm in an airborne unit, so I jump out of planes," she said. "The last thing I would want is a bra that's too restrictive." One recently minted officer from Kansas told me, "I don't think it is a super-great idea, because everyone has different wants and needs when it comes to a bra." She added, "I'd rather get a stipend to buy my own."

After several rounds of negotiations that might have led to a ceasefire in another era, LaFleur and Cushon finally agreed to let me try on The Bra. Before deciding which of the four bra Concepts I should sample, Cushon took my measurements, just as the bra fitters at the Town Shop do. She did some arithmetic and consulted a chart with lots of squares showing "sister bra sizes," which was a new one for me but did make me feel part of a bigger bra family. She told me that she had recently fit about six hundred and fifty female soldiers with the A.T.B. prototypes. She suggested that I try either the Concept C or the D.

"I could try them both," I said. Wrong answer.

"I want to be conscious of the time," Cushon said. I had two whole days, but I decided not to push my luck. Concept D it was. In a glass-walled cubicle, I pulled up the zipper with ease and immediately felt cozily swaddled. The synthetic support was robust and made me think I might enjoy being a mummy. For a moment, my thoughts turned to Barbie, who, in many ways, has one-upped the military for years. Barbie joined the Army in 1989, the year before Desert Storm. Her togs, including a battle-dress uniform and a midnight-blue gown with gold braid trim for nights out as a captain, were approved by the Pentagon. She, like human soldiers, does not yet have a combat-ready bra, but, on the other hand, she does not appear to have problems with jiggling. ♦

ANNALS OF INQUIRY

BITTER PILL

Dying patients wanted access to a new drug of uncertain benefit. But hasty approval comes at a cost.

BY GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS

The wild success of the Ice Bucket Challenge, one of the past decade's feel-good social-media sensations, obscured its origins as a form of extortion. Its source, though murky, might be traced to Norway, where early nominees were pressured to choose between jumping into a frigid body of water and taking care of the weekend's bar tab. By early 2014, the moral ante had been upped: the penalty for noncompliance became, rather more nobly, a contribution to medical research. This structure—which incentivized bravado at the expense of charity—persisted until the spring, when American firefighters helped repackage the experience. Now a high-pressure hosing was the *reward* for a donation to a colleague's cause of choice. That July, a golfer decanted water on his own head in an effort to cheer up his cousin's husband, who had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or A.L.S., and invited others to donate to the "A.L.S. Foundation." By the end of the month, the idea, now connected to one disease, had taken on a life of its own. Bill Gates engineered an elaborate self-soaking contraption, posted high-definition footage, and challenged Elon Musk. The taunt was at once socially contagious, righteous, and fun. But there were still some disposed to see it as a threat. President Barack Obama, when drafted by Ethel Kennedy, Justin Bieber, and Donald Trump, declined in favor of a hundred-dollar contribution to A.L.S. research.

Organizations dedicated to A.L.S., unaccustomed to such largesse, were dumbfounded. At any given time, some thirty thousand Americans have the disease, which is characterized by a continuous loss of motor neurons until muscle function stills. Sustained patient-advocacy campaigns are limited by the fact that no one survives. As Gwen Petersen, a thirty-seven-year-old patient, told me, "There were the usual fund-raising walks, but asking an A.L.S. patient to walk is kind of tone-deaf." Merit Cudkowicz, the chair of neurology at Massachusetts General Hospital, said, "Patients are generally so overwhelmed with the day-to-day of their lives that the patient voice and advocacy were missing. And then it happened, and it's been very powerful, in mostly a really good way." In the pre-Challenge era, research was largely fruitless; the only drug on the market had been approved in 1995. But the viral campaign generated two hundred million dollars in aggregate donations, and one clinician hailed a "new era" in which she could "talk to patients with more hope." There was, in fact, no such thing as the "A.L.S. Foundation," but the assets of the A.L.S. Association, the top search result, grew fivefold, to a hundred and thirty million dollars. The group tripled its allocation to research.

One company working on the problem was a Cambridge-based startup called Amylyx, which traced its origins to a frat house at Brown University. In early 2013, Josh Cohen, an appealingly dishevelled junior, had an idea for a mechanism to slow the progression of degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. Reading around in the literature, he struck upon studies of two known compounds that seemed to suit his notion. One was a generic drug for urea-cycle disorders. The other was an acid found in bear bile, which is a mainstay of Chinese medicine; it can be bought on Amazon for thirty-seven cents a pill. Late one evening, Cohen ran into a fraternity brother named Justin Klee, who asked him why he looked so unwell. Cohen told Klee that he'd been spending his nights researching whether these two molecules might, in combination, prevent neuron death. Within a day or two, they'd decided to start a company.

The pair had almost no idea what they were doing, but a prominent Alzheimer's researcher agreed to collaborate—if only to show two endearing college kids how difficult research really was. To his surprise, initial experiments returned positive results. Potential investors, however, were skittish. As Cohen told me, "There had recently been a long spate of failures in Alzheimer's, and we were just these two young guys." As the Ice Bucket Challenge became ubiquitous, they chanced to get a meeting with Cudkowicz. She had recently run her own trial with one of the compounds, but there is little commercial incentive to study generics, and she couldn't secure the funding to continue. Cohen and Klee, however, had already obtained a patent for their two-drug combination, which they called AMX0035. Cudkowicz persuaded them to pivot to A.L.S.

Their decision was in part emotional. Klee told me that they were struck by the selflessness of A.L.S. patients in trials: "You hear so often, 'I know this may not help me, but I'm doing this for the people who get the diagnosis after me.'" But the new focus also made practical sense. Alzheimer's trials each involve thousands of patients, but those for A.L.S., which is rarer, might enroll only a few hundred. Cudkowicz co-chaired a research organization that offered Amylyx a ready-made trial infrastructure. Advocacy groups were looking to distribute their Ice Bucket money, and Amylyx collected a grant from the A.L.S. Association and A.L.S. Finding a Cure. Substantial investor capital followed. One of the company's largest funders was a Dutch biotech entrepreneur named Henri Termeer, who demonstrated that rare diseases could be rendered profitable—as long as payers would tolerate high prices. Amylyx began a Phase II study that followed a hundred and thirty-seven patients for six months, with a subsequent "open-label extension," during which all trial participants could receive the drug for free. When the results came back, Cohen and Klee called the Alzheimer's researcher, after midnight, and

"Are we selling hope?" the clinician Jonathan Glass said. "Or are we selling things that we know really work?"

ILLUSTRATION BY MARIA CHIMISHKYAN

told him to pour himself a drink. "They didn't say anything about money," he has said. "They told me, 'Guess what: Amylyx is going to help A.L.S. patients.'"

According to a study published in 2020, AMX0035 seemed to slow patients' decline by about twenty-five per cent during the trial period. A later finding gave even greater reason for optimism: in the trial's extension, those who never got the placebo in the first place survived an average of five months longer. The drug had few side effects, apart from some gastrointestinal distress. Cudkowicz told me, "You get so used to things not working out that you try to shield yourself from disappointment, and it was just amazing that their idea worked." Still, the results were not unambiguous. In an editorial, two outside researchers advised that the "tantalizing preliminary data" be interpreted with restraint: the effect was "modest," and a larger trial would be needed as confirmation. Cudkowicz concurred. "We did not design this study to be the single study for F.D.A. approval," she said.

Historically, the F.D.A. has required two "adequate" trials before it approves a drug. In Amylyx's case, a subsequent trial was likely to take three more years. The A.L.S. community, however, felt that there was no time to waste. The majority of current patients would be incapacitated or dead if they had to wait that long. Dr. Neil Thakur, the A.L.S. Association's chief mission officer, observed on the organization's podcast that the study's results were "not a slam dunk." "The findings aren't as strong as what the F.D.A. typically does to skip a Phase III trial," he said. "So I think they're going to need some help to make that decision." Advocacy groups began to mobilize. Brian Wallach, a forty-two-year-old who had co-founded a young organization called I AM A.L.S., believed that his life and those of thousands of fellow-sufferers hung in the balance. "Please do not let another generation of A.L.S. patients die in pursuit of the perfect," he later told regulators. "We want to live. You have the power to make that possible."

Drug regulation in America has been driven by public calamity. In 1937, a company in Tennessee sold Elixir Sulfanilamide as a remedy for streptococcal infections. The active ingredient had been dissolved in a chemical used in antifreeze, and a hundred people died, many of them children. The Food and Drug Administration, which had been feeble since its founding decades earlier, was empowered to insure that drugs weren't needlessly harmful before they could be sold. Nevertheless, useless potions proliferated. In 1961, at the National Congress on Medical Quackery, the U.S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare pointed out that, along with actual snake oils and other nostrums, bottled seawater was being sold for up to twenty dollars a gallon as a "panacea for virtually all human ailments." Soon after, the antiemetic thalidomide was determined to cause severe birth defects overseas. One F.D.A. official had steadfastly resisted corporate pressure to approve it, and public confidence in the institution swelled. Congress radically expanded the agency's mandate, granting it authority over not only safety but also efficacy.

WITH ALL THAT THE FAMILY DEMANDS OF ME, HOW WILL I EVER FIND TIME FOR MY ART?
zoesi

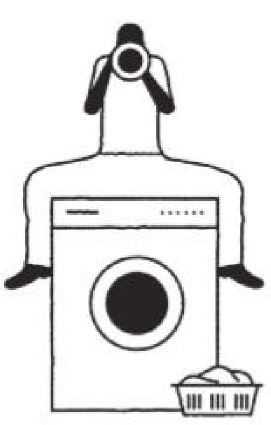
In the next decade, though, free-market pundits and economists increasingly saw the F.D.A. as an example of excessive regulation. The average development times for drugs had grown considerably, and fewer were coming on the market. Some critics attributed this decline in pharmaceutical dynamism to the perverse incentives of the career bureaucrat. There were, they pointed out, two primary kinds of errors that regulators might make. They might approve a product that turned out to be unsafe—as they did in 1976, when they signed off on a swine-flu vaccine that, in some cases, led to paralysis—and face the public's wrath. Or they might fail to act quickly on a drug that later proved effective—as in the case of beta-blockers, which were available in Europe years before they were deemed fit for consumption in the U.S. The first kind of error, a so-called Type I error, was conspicuous, and thus likely to be corrected. But the second kind, a Type II error, had no natural constituency to demand redress. The libertarian economist Alex Tabarrok came to describe these victims as interred in the "invisible graveyard."

On October 11, 1988, members of ACT UP, a newly formed coalition of AIDS activists, stormed the F.D.A.'s headquarters, then in Rockville, Maryland. In the midst of the H.I.V. epidemic, a lengthy drug-approval process seemed unconscionable. Gregg Gonsalves, a former member of ACT UP, told me, "People came up to me in ACT UP meetings and asked if there was a drug that could help with one opportunistic infection or another. There was nothing for them. And to say that out loud is hard." The group's members didn't want to be told what risks they could take. Richard Klein, a retired F.D.A. official, told me, "A guy called me up, and he was really angry that he couldn't use whatever H.I.V. therapy from Mexico he wanted to get. He said, 'I can go to Vegas and gamble away my last nickel and nobody would say anything about that, but this is my life—why can't I gamble with it?' "

As the historian Lewis A. Grossman notes in his excellent book "Choose Your Medicine," previous generations of activists had focussed on a patient's right to have a say in her care. In one study in the nineteen-sixties, about half of doctors surveyed thought that it was medically acceptable to perform a mastectomy on an unconscious woman without her explicit consent. In a 1970 Senate hearing on the safety of oral contraceptives, every member of the proceedings was a man. The women's-health movement changed all of this.

For some activists, the emphasis on autonomy included promoting unorthodox treatments—rejecting chemotherapy in favor of, say, apricot kernels. What distinguished ACT UP was its longing for access to the products of the "government-industrial-academic biomedical complex." Protesters outside the F.D.A. building wore white lab coats stained with fake blood; others held a die-in, with cardboard gravestones bearing epitaphs like "I Died for the Sins of FDA." This sentiment brought AIDS activists into uneasy alignment with the right. Grossman describes a surreal episode of "Crossfire" that aired just hours after the protest. The guests were the AIDS activist Peter Staley, who had worn a "Karate Kid" bandanna and scaled the F.D.A. building's façade to hang a "Silence = Death" banner, and Pat Buchanan, whose recent memoir had described Gay Pride Week as a "celebration of sodomy." Buchanan said, "Mr. Staley, this is going to astonish you, but I agree with you a hundred per cent. I think if someone's got AIDS and someone wants to take a drug, it's their life, and if it gives him hope he ought to be able to take it."

After the ACT UP occupation, Grossman writes, the F.D.A. "never really resumed business as usual." In 1992, it introduced a pathway called "accelerated approval," which could be granted to drugs that showed an impact on a biomarker associated with a given disease (H.I.V. viral load, for example), even if they hadn't yet demonstrated a clear clinical benefit. The agency had also formalized its commitment to "expanded access," a way for patients with serious or life-threatening diseases who had no other options to get investigational drugs. In 1997, Congress allowed the F.D.A. to approve drugs on the basis of a single trial, as long as the evidence was persuasive enough. The entire orientation of the agency changed. It was no longer chiefly protecting patients from drugs that might hurt; it was now trying to facilitate consumer access to drugs that might help.



Brian Wallach grew up in Washington, D.C., the grandson of the last U.S. Ambassador to Iran and the son of establishment lawyers. He served as a political director on the first Obama campaign, where he met his wife, Sandra Abrevaya, a communications director. He then got a job in the White House counsel's office, and later served as a federal prosecutor in Chicago. In 2017, while he was working on a gun-trafficking case, his left hand started to cramp. He dropped his pen, then dropped it again. A few months later, on the same day that the couple brought their second daughter home from the hospital, he was given his diagnosis and told that he had perhaps six months to live. In March, I spoke with Wallach and Abrevaya, as they were preparing for a ski trip to Colorado. Wallach has curly graying hair and sensible blue-rimmed glasses. He spoke into a small marshmallow of a microphone, and wore around his neck a voice amplifier that resembles a camera, giving him the look of an unapologetic tourist. A varsity-style banner on his wall reads, "Joy is an act of resistance." When he first told friends about his diagnosis, he said, he often found himself doing the consoling. "My family never knew if the vacations we were on would be the last," he told me. "I'm someone who's stubborn and optimistic, so it was my job to say, 'This is awful, but we will find a way forward.' "

Wallach and Abrevaya founded I AM A.L.S. as a "patient-centric, patient-led" organization. One of his goals, as a proper Obama disciple, was to "change the narrative" around the disease. He and Abrevaya remember turning off a "60 Minutes" segment about A.L.S. because it was so depressing. "We knew this was not the whole story," he told me. Researchers felt that the Ice Bucket Challenge had put them in a position to make great advances, but they needed influential allies. "The fuller story was one of hope, and the only question was when that hope would be realized," Wallach said. He read every book he could about AIDS activism, and learned that only a "sustained advocacy presence" in D.C. could make A.L.S. a priority. The group hired a lobbying firm and helped form an A.L.S. congressional caucus, which worked to pass legislation that directs a hundred million dollars a year to research. Wallach hand-delivered an open letter to the F.D.A. inquiring after treatments that were "stuck in the pipeline." In a short film circulated by the Obama Foundation, Abrevaya describes the couple as "back in campaign mode. We spend our date nights editing Web-site copy and coming up with awareness strategies."

One of the ways I AM A.L.S. differentiated itself was its relentless pursuit of *any* treatment that seemed promising. Wallach told me that modest gains could add up: "When you're dealing with a terminal illness, you piece together the therapies that keep people alive longer until more curative therapies come on the market." The F.D.A. had made it clear that Amylyx was expected to complete another trial, but Wallach knew that the agency could approve the drug immediately. Scientific certainty was a luxury that only the healthy could afford. He and other patients were already buying a version of the product from compounding pharmacies, for about seven thousand dollars a year. "I will give credit to those drugs for me being here well past the point when I should have passed away," he said. The A.L.S. Association, which some patients had criticized for failing to advocate more aggressively for other experimental medicines, launched an e-mail campaign. Members met with regulators, including the acting director of the F.D.A. "I saw on the campaign and in the White House how important it was for people in Congress to know who you are," Wallach said. "When we announced my diagnosis, everyone reached out and said, 'How can I help?'"

In late May of 2021, the A.L.S. Association convened an event called the We Can't Wait Action Meeting. A patient named Troy Fields expressed frustration that a purported survival benefit of several months, in patients who live only a few years, had been described as "modest." "For me, this could mean walking my daughter down the aisle at her wedding, or witnessing my grandson's birth," he said. Sandy Morris, a well-known A.L.S. activist, told a story about a friend, Cory, who had surveyed the community and determined that patients had a "sky-high acceptance" of the potential risks. "Cory died waiting," she said. "I am here today to say that I am dying waiting."

Wallach called for a congressional hearing, and his wish was swiftly granted. At the hearing, Representative Anna Eshoo referred specifically to Amylyx's drug as she interrogated an F.D.A. official about agency sluggishness, a rare congressional endorsement of an investigational treatment. Representative Jan Schakowsky, who beforehand had met with Wallach, a constituent, thanks to Abrevaya's connections, told a story about a friend with A.L.S. who had chosen assisted suicide. "If I sound upset—because my constituents are here—I have been getting calls from their friends all over the country, who are begging for a bit of hope," she said. Wallach, in his testimony, noted that thousands of patients were watching. "Some of them have waited and postponed their decision for suicide to see this hearing," he said. "When you are diagnosed with A.L.S., you are told you have two to five years to live. So if this won't be on the market for four years, every single A.L.S. patient, including us, will be dead." Two months later, the F.D.A. reversed its position, and invited Amylyx to submit its application.

Contemporary patient advocacy might owe its energy and ambition to AIDS activists, but the radical theatricality of the eighties and nineties—wrapping Jesse Helms's home in a giant condom, scattering victims' ashes on the White House lawn—has largely given way to a shrewd professionalism. The A.L.S. Association's office, in Rosslyn, Virginia, could be confused with the glossy sanctuary of a midsize lobbying firm. When I visited, in March, Calaneet Balas, the C.E.O., told me that the group's goal is "making A.L.S. livable"—an objective that means different things to different people. What we now call A.L.S. might ultimately be understood to encompass several different diseases. For ten per cent of patients, the disease is linked to known genetic mutations. For the remaining cases, environmental and behavioral factors are presumably relevant. There are unexplained clusters, for example, in Ohio and Michigan, and veterans are more than twice as likely to contract the disease. At the A.L.S. Association's urging, the V.A. has designated the disease as connected to military service, which has unlocked additional benefits. Before Amylyx's drug, the Association hadn't involved itself in an approval process—not that it had many opportunities to do so. But the group was invested in this drug, both literally—it stood to make a return of a million dollars on its original grant, which it planned to dedicate to future research—and symbolically: approval would pleasingly close the loop on the Ice Bucket Challenge. Still, Thakur, the chief mission officer, told me that the organization was ultimately convinced by the evidence: "We don't want to be confused with a group that's not scientific."

AIDS advocacy—which drafted on previous movements—helped adapt the health-care system to the desires of patients. Today, they are consulted at every stage of the drug-development and approval process: they help shape funding strategies at the National Institutes of Health and contribute to technical debates over trial design, study criteria, and the relevance of particular metrics to their own experiences. As an F.D.A. representative put it, patients come to the table with their own Ph.D.—"personal history of disease." Patient-advocacy organizations have flourished, and some have been extremely fortunate in their strategic decisions: the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation funded research into drugs that have proved nothing short of magical for some patients, transforming a death sentence into a manageable condition.

Investments in basic research, however, are generally long-term bets, and people with terminal diagnoses are understandably impatient. They have come to see drug-approval decisions as their moments of maximum leverage. As Grossman put it to me, advisory-committee meetings, in which outside experts advise the F.D.A. on particularly vexing cases, "used to be snorefests, just a group of green-eyeshade people sitting around running numbers. Now, depending on the drug, they've turned into fora for public advocacy." Many patient-advocacy groups are lushly funded: last year, the Alzheimer's Association's revenue was about half a billion dollars. A study in *The New England Journal of Medicine* found that at least eighty-three per cent of the largest groups receive money from pharmaceutical companies. "H.I.V. activism was a true grassroots movement, not one funded by drug companies," Daniel Carpenter, the author of "Reputation and Power," a colossal history of the F.D.A., told me. "I don't want to say everything since then has been astroturfed. But companies do learn the lesson of 'Oh, that's how you get a drug through the F.D.A.'"

Groups that are wealthier and better coördinated have significant advantages: breast-cancer advocacy organizations have been particularly potent, and Carpenter has shown that they enjoy much faster approval times than groups dedicated to prostate cancer, which is similarly prevalent, or to lung cancer, which is deadlier. In 2002, lung-cancer patients coalesced in support of Iressa, a drug that faced considerable F.D.A. doubt; the drug was approved, and is still prescribed to a subset of patients. In 2016, parents of children with Duchenne muscular dystrophy pressured the F.D.A. to green-light a drug that had been studied in a single uncontrolled trial of only twelve boys. Hundreds of supporters flocked to an F.D.A. committee meeting, including several children in wheelchairs, and the approval camp prevailed.

It wasn't until recently that the role of advocacy groups provoked public scrutiny. In June, 2021, the F.D.A. announced the accelerated approval of Aduhelm, the first new treatment for Alzheimer's in eighteen years. Aduhelm reduced levels of amyloid plaques in the brain, a biomarker that tracks with cognitive decline. But the drug seemed to do little, if anything, to arrest or reverse the course of the disease. It also carried the risk of serious adverse effects, including brain bleeding. Nevertheless, many enrollees felt sure that their progression had been slowed. The Alzheimer's Association—which had collected about half a million dollars that year from the drug's sponsor, Biogen—exhorted its members to plead the drug's case. (The Association's C.E.O. at the time said that its actions were not affected by pharmaceutical funding.) An F.D.A. advisory committee voted against the drug's approval, but the committee was overruled by the F.D.A.

The drug was put on the market at a cost of fifty-six thousand dollars a year. Three members of the committee resigned, among them Aaron Kesselheim, a professor at Harvard Medical School, who declared the ruling perhaps "the worst approval decision that the F.D.A. has made that I can remember." Kesselheim saw it as part of a long war of attrition. "In recent years, under steady pressure from the pharmaceutical industry and the patient groups it funds, the F.D.A. has progressively lowered its standards," he wrote. (Biogen stands by the drug, and maintains that it satisfied the requirements for accelerated approval.) Some patients felt as though they'd been sold a bill of goods; a retired neurologist in the early stages of the disease told the *Times* that he found the Alzheimer's Association's campaign "shocking and irresponsible." But perhaps no one was as crestfallen as A.L.S. advocates, who lamented only that the F.D.A. had not yet shown them the same generosity.

GLENN NISSAN

"Oh, great. Pumpernickel Pete is here."

In March, 2022, the F.D.A. gathered an advisory committee to discuss Amylyx's application. Members would be asked to vote on whether the results so far "establish a conclusion" that the drug is "effective." Agency officials, in their briefing documents, were polite, respectful, and unequivocal: the answer, as far as they were concerned, was no. One of the members of the committee was Caleb Alexander, a soft-spoken pharmacoepidemiologist at Johns Hopkins, who spoke with me from a sabbatical in Munich. He told me he wished that the evidence had been more persuasive. "Too bad but I suppose this is why one has advisory committees," he wrote in his notes.

As the agency saw it, there were a number of problems with the trial. Recruits had been told that they might experience gastrointestinal side effects, so they could have guessed if they were getting the real thing or a placebo—a salient issue for a trial that relied on self-reported measures. Trickier still were potential "baseline imbalances," especially during the trial's extension: those who switched from the placebo to the drug were, on average, healthier than those who had dropped out along the way, which might have exaggerated the ostensible effects. Some outcomes were also compared with "external" controls—that is, data from patients in previous decades, when the general standard of care was lower. Most important, the F.D.A. had proposed one method of statistical analysis, but Amylyx had elected to use an alternative. When the F.D.A. subjected the data to its own test, the results were no longer statistically significant. (Administrators defended their analysis, and argued that the other apparent issues were either negligible or addressed.) Alexander told me, "It was like fourth down in football, where you have to bring out the measurement tape to see if you got a first down or not."

The agency was reluctant to accept the apparent five-month survival benefit, which it regarded as the result of a statistical fishing expedition. Alexander told me, "I was mindful of the old Texas sharpshooter fallacy—you shoot holes in a barn and draw bull's-eyes around those holes." The agency did not rule out the possibility that the drug might do *something*. But the standard for approval is not "promising"; it is "substantial evidence of effectiveness." Cudkowicz said, "In the end, we just didn't know who was right. This was a really small study that was never designed to do what it was being asked to do."

The patients, for their part, seemed unable to believe that this discussion was happening at all. They felt as though they were being buried alive by the disease while the F.D.A. was making a fuss about confidence intervals and P values. Wallach told me that the agency's position had been pushed primarily by its biostatistician—the last defender of a retrograde regime that sought "one-hundred-per-cent certainty that a drug works." Patients recruited by the advocacy groups told agonizing stories. When Jeff Derby was diagnosed, in 2018, his neurologists told him to get his affairs in order and to eat whatever he wanted. He believed that his presence at the meeting was due to Amylyx's drug. “I have seen six A.L.S. patients in my social circle over the past two years pass away without it, and yet their timeline was similar to mine,” he said. He asked committee members to imagine having a loved one with A.L.S.: “Even if it is only six and a half months, would you not want that for them?” Sandy Morris, the patient activist who had commanded the room during the We Can't Wait meeting, now spoke mostly through her daughter. “My apologies for my compromised voice,” she said on her own, at the end. “Maybe if I had been allowed to take AMX0035 you would be able to hear me more clearly.”

Alexander told me, “Those clips from the meeting are very compelling. But they're not talking about the scientific merits at hand. Some of the patients just assume the five-month purported benefit is real. Didn't they realize just how large the probability was that the drug won't work? That this might not be a one-per-cent chance it won't work but a *good* chance?” As Jonathan Glass, an Emory University researcher and physician with three decades of experience treating A.L.S. patients, told me, “What are we selling to patients? Are we selling hope? Is that what we should be selling? Or are we selling things that we know really work?”

In the end, the committee voted against the drug, 6–4. One skeptical patient, who has been affiliated with I AM A.L.S., told me that he had been asked to testify at the meeting but refused. “I didn't see the evidence,” he said. “It's very easy to beat the statistics to death until you get a finding you like.” He continued, “It's possible that the A.L.S. Association has been driven into positions of public support for a quote-unquote promising therapy that it might privately question, because I AM A.L.S. is taking that position. But I AM A.L.S. itself is being pushed into that position by this super-hard-line crowd, and no one can afford to be anything less than the most strident.”

THERAPY

Early snow. Garbage
trucks in the alley pushing
slush around, chewing.

Gnawed by a hundred
minor obligations, I draw
a bath, then sit on the toilet

fully clothed. I want
a therapist, I said to Meg,
smarter than me. You

charm them, she said. You
need a man, someone the age
your dad would be now.

How old would you be now?
I do the math and come up
with a number so low

I check again. Nothing
changes. I go out and drag
the bins back to the house,

then lower myself
into the lukewarm tub. I let half
the water out and turn

the tap, mixing the original
water with water that would
scald me if I touched it.

—*Edgar Kunz*

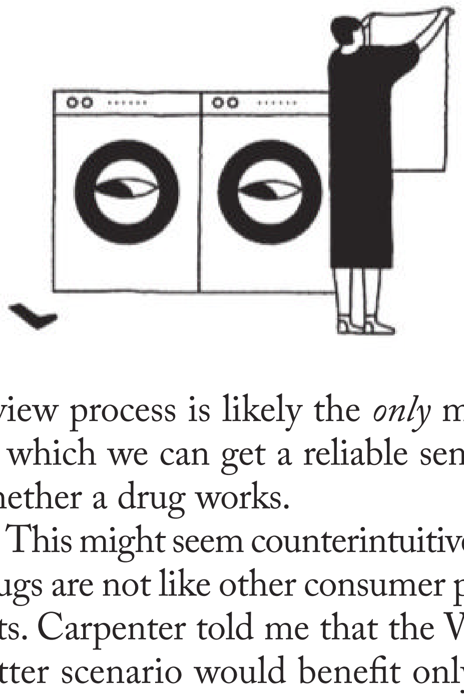
More than two decades after he first joined ACT UP, Gregg Gonsalves, now a professor of epidemiology at Yale and a MacArthur Fellow, fretted that AIDS activists had made a “devil's bargain.” The Alzheimer's Association's “activist shtick” on behalf of Aduhelm, he said, reminded him of a story from the AIDS era. One night, Larry Kramer arrived at an ACT UP meeting hollering that people were dancing in the streets of San Francisco because something called Compound Q, a Chinese cucumber extract, was going to alleviate AIDS symptoms. As it turned out, the extract didn't alleviate anything. “It sounds ridiculous in retrospect, but every few months you'd hear about something like Compound Q,” Gonsalves told me. “At a certain point, we realized, Oh, shit, we're just getting dud after dud after dud.” Gonsalves has worked with A.L.S. advocates, guiding them on how best to make headway. But he has also reminded them that AIDS activists “got lucky”—an effective cocktail was developed about a decade after the virus was identified. A.L.S. was first described a hundred and fifty years ago, but we still have a lot to learn about the underlying physiopathology. Gonsalves's father recently died after a long descent into dementia. “We need better drugs for neurodegenerative diseases,” he told me. “But the way to do it is not to say, ‘Open the floodgates of the F.D.A.’ ” In the AIDS era, Gonsalves learned a lesson that each new patient community has had to learn for itself. “Access was only as good as the answers that came with the pills,” he has written. “Hope in the absence of data was astrology.”

By the early nineties, ACT UP was beginning to splinter. In 1988, when activists stormed the F.D.A. building, the agency was the enemy, and the goal was to get "drugs into bodies." During the next few years, however, a group of autodidactic "treatment activists" collaborated more closely with the scientific community, and their perspective changed. As many activists have since acknowledged, it wasn't entirely fair to blame the agency for the apathy shown by the Reagan Administration. F.D.A. officials had made AZT, the first antiretroviral to target H.I.V., available for "compassionate use" while still in trials, and it was approved with unusual alacrity. As Gonsalves told me, "There weren't hundreds of drugs hiding behind the curtain at the F.D.A. It was much more complex." In 1991, ACT UP called for a moratorium on close collaborations between activists and researchers. Gonsalves and some of his colleagues split off to form the Treatment Action Group, or TAG.

The accelerated-approval pathway, which was introduced the next year, was heralded by ACT UP as a major victory, but, in time, TAG activists grew apprehensive. In theory, accelerated approval was provisional: the drug could go on the market, but the drug's sponsor still had to prove that it worked. TAG activists worried that companies with an approval in hand were unlikely to follow through. In 1992, a new antiretroviral was the first candidate for the process. Mark Harrington, a TAG founder and the F.D.A. advisory committee's patient representative, was unconvinced that the drug would do much. But the AIDS community was largely in favor of the drug, and he felt honor-bound to vote yes. His suspicions eventually proved correct. Harrington later wrote that "the AIDS community, in its understandable desperation, was being manipulated by industry to demand the expeditious approval of inadequately tested drugs."

Two years later, Gonsalves, who replaced Harrington on the committee, was asked to consider another antiretroviral. He felt that the confirmatory trial planned for the drug was too small. When he voted no, ACT UP activists described the decision as "self-hating and GENOCIDAL." Later that year, the F.D.A. evaluated a new protease inhibitor that was still in early-stage trials. Gonsalves and other TAG members wrote a letter to the F.D.A. commissioner, imploring him not to grant accelerated approval. Many members of ACT UP were horrified. As it turned out, the drug worked, but it was soon overtaken by others in its class; had it been hastily approved on flimsy evidence, a generation of patients might have been treated with an inferior product. If the crusade for access wasn't accompanied by a commensurately spirited campaign for answers, the chief beneficiaries would be the pharmaceutical companies.

Such episodes prefigured a broader turn in the case for exacting drug regulation. For the past fifty years, the standard criticism of the F.D.A.—one common among conservatives and patients—has been that it treats those who are ill as too muddleheaded and desperate to think for themselves. The agency might otherwise publicize its opinions without making them coercive: just as customers in search of a budget-pick vacuum might consult Wirecutter, those curious about a drug could turn to the F.D.A. Patients would be allowed to experiment, and their doctors could be trusted to guide them. But the TAG activists argued that an empowered F.D.A. was essential to generate the information necessary to make rational choices. Amy Kapczynski, who worked with ACT UP and is now a law professor at Yale, has pointed out that pharmaceutical knowledge is a public good, one that no market actor has an incentive to produce. Companies tend to publish positive data; insurance companies, conversely, interpret results to restrict coverage. The F.D.A.'s premarket review process is likely the *only* means by which we can get a reliable sense of whether a drug works.



This might seem counterintuitive, but drugs are not like other consumer products. Carpenter told me that the Wirecutter scenario would benefit only the companies with the largest marketing budgets: "You can't go out and drive a drug. You can't feel a drug working. So if I can get into the market and persuade people with advertising that something is superior, I can advertise my way to a position of profitability." It is often impossible even for clinicians to tell whether a medication—especially one that purports to slow a disease's progression rather than cure it—is helping people. As Joseph Ross, a professor at the Yale School of Medicine, told me, "People want to wave their hands and say, 'Somehow we'll find out whether it works,' and it's just not the case."

The accelerated-approval pathway is supposed to split the difference by making drugs available while confirmatory trials are pending. Once a drug is on the market, however, it can be difficult to recruit participants for placebo-controlled trials. (Why would anyone risk getting a sugar pill when she could get the real thing?) The remaining option—a process of trial and error—sounds more plausible in theory than it is in practice. Alison Bateman-House, a bioethicist at N.Y.U.'s medical school, raised the example of convalescent plasma, which was indiscriminately used to treat COVID patients at the beginning of the pandemic. "People were, like, 'Wow, ninety thousand people are using this, so we'll get real-world data,' but, as it turns out, we still have no idea," she said. Even when drug sponsors manage to complete confirmatory trials, the results can remain up for grabs. Kesselheim, the Harvard professor, recently looked at the past two decades of accelerated approvals in oncology—a field often touted by advocates as an excellent model of "regulatory flexibility"—and found that only about a fifth of approved drugs ever showed a meaningful impact on survival. Cancer patients now have their choice among an array of very expensive options that might or might not do anything for them.

The F.D.A. has the power to rescind drug approvals, but the process is burdensome and protracted. In 2011, the agency gave accelerated approval to Makena, the only F.D.A.-approved drug for preterm birth, a condition that disproportionately affects women of color. A large follow-up study, which was completed eight years later, showed no benefits. But the manufacturer drew on the support of doctors and patients—who don't appreciate having their only option taken away—to argue that the drug's availability was a matter of health equity. It was taken off the market only this past spring, under extreme duress. (Makena's manufacturer did not respond to requests for comment.)

The most coherent argument against strict regulation is that it is simply immoral to withhold a potentially effective treatment from a person who wants it. Jessica Flanigan, a libertarian philosopher and the author of the book "Pharmaceutical Freedom," told me, "Patients who are suffering shouldn't be used as a means to generate public goods. It is wrong to hold patients hostage." But the reality is that, in most cases, the best way to know if a new drug works is to deny access to some people it might benefit. This is a wrenching but often necessary trade-off. To prioritize access over knowledge is to address the needs of current patients at the expense of future ones. Either way, it's the lives of patients all the way down.

The skeptical patient told me that he thinks about this all the time. "There are maybe twenty-five thousand of us now," he said. "But when you do the math the total number of people in the U.S. who will ever get A.L.S.—maybe five years from now, maybe seventy years—is well over half a million people, and we owe them actions and policies and principled behavior that maximize the odds of getting a therapy that stops or prevents this disease. Part of this, for me, is the clarifying effect when you're given a terminal diagnosis: How do I want to live the rest of my life? I try to live as best I can." He was willing to articulate this argument only anonymously, because it left him vulnerable to nasty mobs on social media: "When you mention our obligations to people who don't yet have A.L.S., you don't always get a positive reception."

Brian Wallach believed, after the first advisory committee, that the F.D.A. could still be persuaded to rise to the occasion. When we spoke, he and Abrevaya rejected the insinuation that they had mustered "soft anecdotes" against hard science. "The characterization of us as desperate and uneducated, pressuring government to do things they shouldn't do, is hurting our efforts to climb a mountain to save our own lives," Wallach said. He asked Jonathan Glass, who had administered one of the trial sites, to add his byline to an op-ed on the drug's merits, but Glass demurred. Glass told me, "I really like Brian, and I said to him, 'Brian, you're still going to die, whether you get this drug or not. It's the disease that's killing people, and it's nobody's fault.'" He added, "This black-and-white idea that if you approve the drug you're saving lives and if you don't there's blood on your hands—that's just a useless argument." The A.L.S. Association organized an open letter from clinicians, but Glass refused to sign it; for a trial administrator to weigh in on approval felt to him like a clear conflict of interest.

Glass wasn't alone in his misgivings, but it wasn't easy to argue with terminally ill patients without seeming monstrous. A respected bioethicist put forth, in a mild tweet, that she believed future patients also deserved consideration. An A.L.S. patient responded with a video in which the bioethicist's head had been superimposed on a woman forcibly stripped of her clothes and thrust into a wheelchair. "Do not speak on behalf of the A.L.S. community," the text reads. "You do not have a degree in 'dying from a brutal terminal disease.' At the same time, we will not comment on being a heartless robot that lacks human compassion, as we do not have a degree in cuntiness. Bodies are ravaged by ALS. We are powerless. The FDA is not, and yet the rape of every ALS body continues under their watch." The skeptical patient told me, "There are A.L.S. neurologists who have told me that they felt almost blackmailed into supporting some of these therapies because of the fear of being attacked on social media, and, if they're running trials, they can't afford to have patients walking away from their clinics."

In September, the F.D.A. took the exceptionally unusual step of reconvening the advisory committee. New analyses had been published, along with a paper by Cudkowicz that sought to rebut the F.D.A.'s criticisms of the trial. But Cudkowicz said that patients deserved as much credit: "There was a whole groundswell in the movement. People had gone from thinking approval wasn't even an option to the idea that it would be offensive not to approve it." Caleb Alexander, who had voted no initially, was stunned. "They gave the sponsor a second bite at the apple," he said. The F.D.A.'s summary documents looked as bleak as they had the first time. As Mark Weston, the committee's patient representative, put it, "It almost feels like this is a setup to say, 'Gee, we warned you.'"

But when the meeting began Billy Dunn, then the director of the F.D.A.'s neurology office and the official who oversaw Aduhelm's approval, opened by declaring that A.L.S. patients were entitled to the "maximum degree of regulatory flexibility." The worst thing that could happen was for the Phase III trial, which is required for European approval, to show that the drug didn't work, and Dunn asked Amylyx's C.E.O.s if, in that case, they would withdraw the drug. Justin Klee, now a thirty-one-year-old executive with shareholders, offered a pledge of sorts: "We will do what is right for patients, which includes voluntarily removing the product from the market." Kesselheim told me, "To highlight this unenforceable promise as an essential part of that meeting? I can empathize with somebody sitting on the committee and thinking it seemed like it was theatre."

The F.D.A.'s remit does not extend to drug pricing, but Kenneth Fischbeck, a committee member from the N.I.H., pushed to consider the issue. Amylyx had already made the drug freely available through an expanded-access program, though enrollment had been capped at a few hundred. "What we are basically doing, as I understand it, is helping to decide whether or not the company can charge for this drug," he said. "I don't think there's any limit on their ability to give it away for free."

The F.D.A. saw nothing new in Amylyx's presentation aside from more analytic sleight of hand; the company's supporters saw nothing new in the F.D.A.'s hesitation aside from what Wallach called "baseless, statistical arguments." If it seemed as though the participants were trapped in a looping existentialist play, it was because they were. They weren't really arguing over the data; they were agonizing about how to dwell, under conditions of pain and uncertainty, in proximity to death. The composition of the room, however, had changed. There were more clinicians: Cudkowicz, who had helped run Amylyx's trials, told me that she spoke in favor of approval because she was confident that the executives would do the right thing. The patient side was marked by absences, including that of Sandy Morris, who, a week before, had chosen a death with dignity.

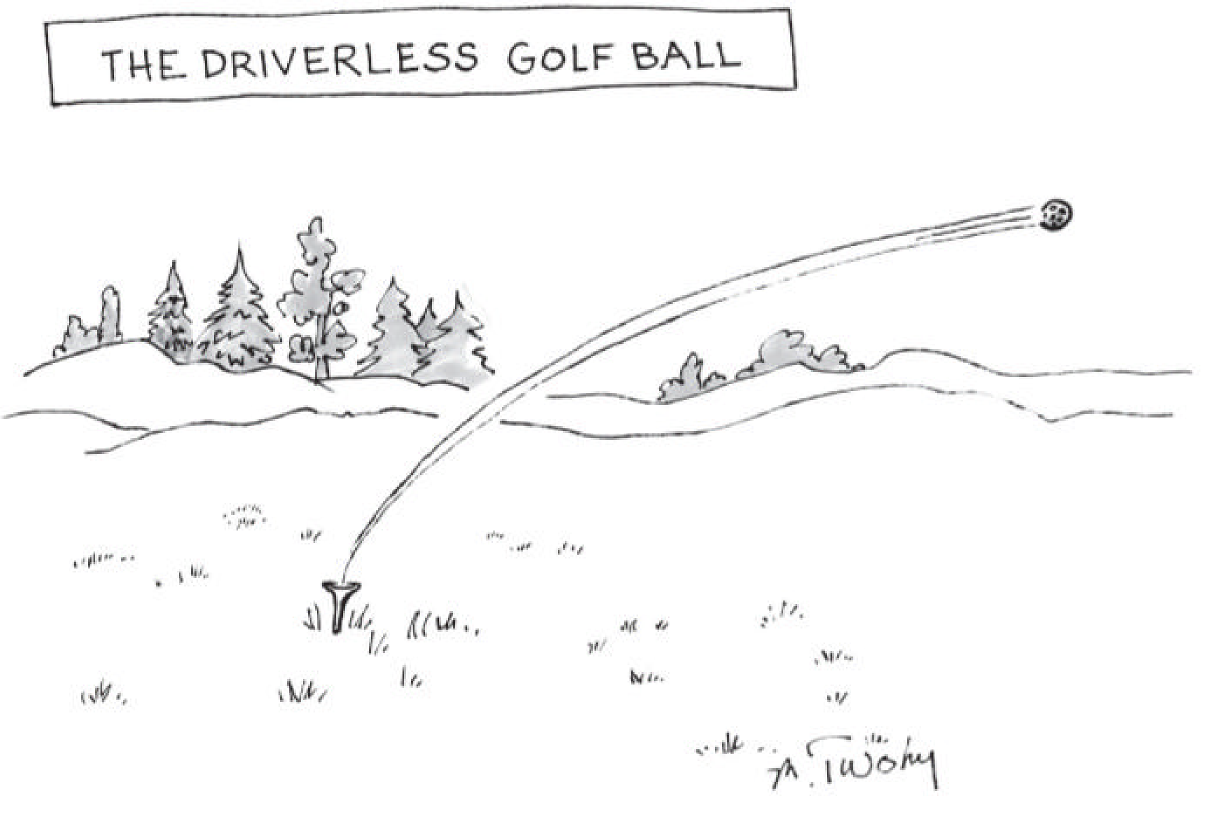
The crucial difference between the two meetings was the question put to the committee. Where it was initially asked to vote narrowly on effectiveness, it was now being asked to consider a fuzzier test: whether the drug, in light of the "unmet need in A.L.S.," could reasonably be prescribed. The committee voted in favor of approval, 7–2. The committee chair, Thomas Montine, switched his vote to yes. "To me, the challenge before the F.D.A. panel was the balance of compassion and certainty," he told me. "Compassion tells us to make this available to people who have nothing." Fischbeck cast a second no vote, a decision that he, too, said was motivated by compassion. "I have had friends who've died from A.L.S. over the years," he told me. "I've long thought it's the worst disease anyone can have. It is important for us as a field to be motivated by their desperation but not to take advantage of it." He related a story from early in his career: "One patient's family had gone to Florida to get a snake-venom extract that cost, like, forty thousand dollars, and they had sold their house in Philadelphia to pay for that. I found that so abhorrent."

Three weeks later, the F.D.A. announced the approval of the drug, which would carry the trade name Relyvrio. (Officials noted that they felt the drug was worth confirming, despite the uncertainty, "given the serious and life-threatening nature of A.L.S.") On a conference call with investors, Klee seemed to walk back the vow to withdraw the drug if it proved ineffective: "The Phase III trial is not a formal commitment." (Klee told me that the study's timelines would be met, and said, with the sincerity that had endeared him to clinicians, "If we have a drug that's not helping people, why in the world would we keep it on the market?" Cohen showed me a bracelet he was wearing that read, "What Would Sandy Do?") Glass, who was on the conference call, told me, "We kept asking him, 'How much is it going to cost? How much?'" He said that when Klee revealed the answer—a hundred and fifty-eight thousand dollars a year—"people were just flabbergasted. You did this for *patients*?"

Some patients saw the approval as a triumph. "It was very emotional," Wallach said. "Most of the people who were part of the trial are not here with us anymore." But others weren't sure how to feel. Recently, Gwen Petersen welcomed me to her light-filled, staircaseless home in Connecticut; she apologized for the scarcity of furniture, but one or two gratuitous end tables can make life with a walker feel like a steeplechase. She had been diagnosed as a thirty-two-year-old newlywed. (A psychiatrist she first saw thought that her balance issues were psychosomatic, and prescribed anti-anxiety medication.) She had participated in a trial for an investigational stem-cell treatment called NurOwn. "I had seven lumbar punctures with a fifty-fifty coin flip of getting a placebo, and I did it for the next generation," she said. "If these drugs truly work, and the evidence is there, then let people have them! But do we want a bunch of subpar therapies where the data has been sliced and diced three different ways from Sunday? And do we want to pay a hundred and sixty thousand dollars a year for a therapy that has 'eh' benefit?"

Klee told me that the company had tried to price the drug so that patients could get it "effectively, quickly, and affordably today," and pledged reinvestment in further research. He pointed out the company has a co-pay program that fully covers out-of-pocket expenses for privately insured patients. For those with government insurance, though, the situation is more complicated. Blaine Dangel, another patient, told me that her mother, who also has A.L.S., would incur a twenty-per-cent Medicare co-pay for Relyvrio, or about thirty thousand dollars a year, which is half of her fixed income. Dangel's wife, Lauren Broffman, who has a Ph.D. in health policy, said that the situation is excruciating for her as both a spouse and a scientist. "I wanted you to be able to take that medicine while waiting for the data to come through," she told Dangel. "I just wish there was a better mechanism than that circusy approval process."

The lingering uncertainty might be tolerable if drug prices were scaled in proportion to their benefit. In many countries, independent governmental bodies negotiate with manufacturers on that basis. In the United States, companies can charge whatever the market will bear. Last year, a nonprofit watchdog determined that a fair price for Relyvrio might be as little as nine thousand dollars a year. Steve Pearson, who leads the nonprofit, told me that our inattention to cost-effectiveness has cascading effects. When insurers refuse to cover an expensive drug of dubious benefit, as one payer did for Relyvrio this winter, only the wealthy can afford to take a flyer on it. But when companies do reimburse for such drugs, they pass on the cost to all of us, in the form of rising premiums. Taxpayers shoulder the burden of Medicare and Medicaid, and



"Hi—'Mom'? Going to Kayla's house? Thanks!"

the underinsured are driven into bankruptcy. "It's really the lower-income people who are most hurt by it," Pearson said.

Cathy Collet, who lost her mother to A.L.S. and now watches over the community like a loving but stern librarian, told me she wishes that the advocacy organizations had the courage to oppose the industry on pricing. "They could say to the companies, 'If you're going to come in at six digits, you're not going to get our support,'" she said. But patients are easily extorted—as in, "Nice rare disease you have there. Wouldn't it be a shame if our research pipeline dried up?" As it turns out, an actual protection racket isn't even necessary. Many patients have become convinced that their interests and those of the drug companies are aligned: if companies see a congenial regulatory environment and a viable market for A.L.S. treatment, they might invest in further research. It's just as likely, however, that mediocre but profitable drugs sate the industry's desire to experiment. This has already been the case with Aduhelm, which set a precedent for several other similar treatments, one of which recently won accelerated approval. Seven years after the accelerated approval of the treatment for Duchenne muscular dystrophy, the manufacturer has had two similar drugs approved; confirmatory trials for all three remain incomplete.

Gonsalves has told the A.L.S. advocates he's worked with, including Collet, Sandy Morris, and Gwen Petersen, that using the sop of their "voice" on a panel to push for borderline approvals perpetuates a "cycle of defeat." He brokered introductions at the N.I.H.—the "first stop on the train," Gonsalves told them, rather than the last. In a meeting, he watched them press for more comprehensive research into the disease. "I felt like I'd found kindred spirits," he said. Still, Collet told me that a single-minded focus on drugs is something that only people of privilege can afford. She'd recently taken a Twitter poll: "I asked them, 'If you had a hundred thousand dollars, what would you want to spend it on? A new drug, home modifications, or quality home care?' Quality home care got sixty-one per cent of the votes." Jonathan Katz, an A.L.S. clinician and researcher in San Francisco, told me that he had just seen a patient, the father of three young kids, who lacked a home health aide but understandably wanted a Relyvrio prescription: "The wife told me, 'I don't have time for anything. When I have to get groceries, I have to put two newborn twins and my husband in a van.' How did we get the money to pay for this new drug and we don't have the money to help a family in this situation, which would be cheaper?"

This, of course, would require a complete overhaul of the health-care system. In the meantime, the existing regulatory apparatus has been steadily destabilized. The tactics of the AIDS era drew transformative attention to the "invisible graveyard," but the past three decades have seen an overcorrection, and the problem of paternalism has given way to the problem of benign neglect. The AIDS crisis also created the policy instruments to chart a middle path. Clinical trials could be made as inclusive as possible. Patients who cannot enroll in trials could have access, circumstances permitting, to investigational drugs through comprehensive expanded-access programs. Accelerated approvals could be subject to a tight timeline for confirmatory evidence, and there could be an enforcement mechanism for the rapid withdrawal of drugs that are not serving the sick. There is growing consensus on these points, but all are easier said than done. And no policy will ever fully resolve the tension between access and knowledge. The recognition that the system has a cost—that there is no deliverance from the purgatory of these trade-offs—does not make it any easier to conclude, in any individual case, that a patient should be barred from taking something she hopes will make her better. When I spoke to patients who wanted Relyvrio, I couldn't help but feel, in the moment, that they deserved the opportunity.

The existentialist play continues to loop. Wallach has long been a supporter of NurOwn, which was developed by an Israeli company called BrainStorm. The NurOwn trials failed, but many patients nonetheless believe that the F.D.A. is blocking their access to a miracle procedure. A highly active Facebook group called No More Excuses! has rallied support; posts repeat variations of the idea that NurOwn, which the F.D.A. keeps "locked up," delivers a "100% slowing of progression." In one campaign, patients posted photographs of themselves in shallow graves with their mouths covered in red tape. "As an ALS patient this makes me scream for access for all of us who are dying due to rampant systemic paternalism," Wallach wrote. "Neurologists and FDA dismiss this as 'anecdotes.' No. These are our lives, our bodies and our evidence."

The F.D.A. has tried to de-escalate the situation: at one point, the agency issued an unconventional statement to combat the spread of misleading information, pointing out, for example, that there were actually *more* excess deaths among those who took the drug than among those who took the placebo. (BrainStorm has defended its drug, and a representative noted, "None of the deaths in the trial were deemed related to treatment by the principal investigators.") Collet told me a story about a patient who spoke at an F.D.A. meeting to describe a preternatural recovery. "He got up and talked about how before he took NurOwn he'd been having trouble walking, and then he ran around the conference-room table," she said. "In the back of my mind, I thought, A.L.S. has its ways of having ups and downs, and it's entirely possible that he was on the placebo. I suspect some of these miracle stories are the reason the company never unblinded the trial." She added, "It's easy for us to romanticize the H.I.V. history, but it wasn't all demonstrations that got things done—it was a lot of hard work figuring out what the science could and couldn't do. There's a tendency in A.L.S. to say, 'I am real-world evidence,' but that's not how it works." Except sometimes it is. In March, the F.D.A. announced that NurOwn would receive an advisory-committee meeting.

In 2018, Brooke Eby, a sportive goofball with strawberry-blond hair, started to feel as though her left foot couldn't keep up. She was a proud graduate of Lehigh University, and had a job at Salesforce that she loved. She told me, "I was a twenty-nine-year-old in New York City—what a place to have to limp slowly down the sidewalk!" At first, doctors didn't see anything obviously wrong, and even specialists were reluctant to make firm pronouncements. "I was not what they picture for A.L.S.," she told me. "After years of being poked and prodded, I was, like, 'Someone man up and say it. I'm sick of people dancing all around.'"

Recently, I met Eby for pastries—A.L.S. patients are encouraged not to lose weight—at a bakery near her apartment, in a prefabricated but lavishly A.D.A.-compliant neighborhood in North Bethesda, Maryland. Eby has a self-deprecating wit, and joked that she requires thirty-two turns to park her power chair. "Once it affects my speech and swallowing, it'll get serious, but for now it's like I got into a car accident and never recovered," she said. Because her diagnosis took so long—a common story—Eby was excluded from all clinical trials. She was prescribed two existing drugs, and, in November, she got her first dose of Relyvrio. She wasn't not going to take it. But, she told me, "none of the drugs are life-changing." Eby is in a group called Her A.L.S. Story, which includes Petersen, Dangel, and more than fifty other young women. She has observed that there's a fairly clear distinction in the group between those with means, who give money to fund drug research, and those who lack power chairs or basic support.

Eby had a bad case of COVID last summer, and in a hallucinatory fugue state she wrote down some ideas for TikTok videos. A few weeks later, she showed the ideas to a friend, who encouraged her to post. In the clips, which are often very funny, Eby assumes the character of a typically ditzy influencer to describe what life with A.L.S. is like. She became known primarily for videos that documented her attempts to discover the best way to mask the taste of Relyvrio, which comes in a small packet to be dissolved in water, like Emergen-C, and has an extremely astringent flavor. She has tried various aperitivi and digestifs, including peanut butter, picklebacks, Hershey's syrup, and taste-altering "miracle berries"; she's taken her Relyvrio through a straw, via a giant syringe, with a laundry clip on her nose, and out of a beer bong.

This February, I met up with her at an A.L.S. event in Washington, D.C., hosted by Collet, in a conference room with a view of the Capitol. During a coffee break, Eby took out a packet of Relyvrio and asked a dozen people to try it, later describing the activity, in voice-over, as a "Hunger Games for chasers." When I tasted the drug, it had a radioactive tartness, like pond water from Chernobyl; I tried to muffle the flavor with a Snickers bar, but it lingered for hours. Once we'd done our shots, Eby reminded us that we'd just consumed hundreds of dollars' worth of white powder.

Demand for Relyvrio remains high. Cudkowicz told me that her medical practice could scarcely keep up with the requests for prescriptions. Jonathan Katz, the clinician in San Francisco, said, "Since this drug came out, I feel like I'm the conduit to write prescriptions for drugs for a company to make a lot of money." Analysts predict that Amylyx's revenue this year will be almost four hundred million dollars. Katz added, "Nobody is saying, 'Stop cutting these things so close and sticking them on the market and charging a million dollars,' because then you get yelled at for telling the truth." Amylyx's Phase III trial is still under way in Europe, though regulators there recently indicated that the outlook for the company's first approval application is inauspicious. The results of the trial, which should be returned in 2024, may depend on how you squint at them. By that point, Relyvrio could be a billion-dollar drug. What will happen then? Klee promised to do "whatever is best for patients." And there will always be people who are convinced that something is working for them—either because, for some idiopathic reason, it actually is, or because it's lovely to think so.

A few months ago, Eby went off all three drugs. She told me, of Relyvrio, "I had no idea if it was doing anything. People were pooping their pants, and if you don't have a body that's working that can be an issue. It wasn't for me, but I felt like crap—my muscles were tired and achy." Still, she wasn't in bad spirits. "When I'm having a bad day, I just watch a lot of Harry Potter. The A.L.S. community is all about Harry Potter. It seems like there's no chance things are going to work out for him, and he ended up fine!"

Eby recently raised more than seventy thousand dollars for research in less than a week. "We just need to buy ourselves time—maybe there will be a medical miracle and we'll be around to see it and really benefit from it," she said. "I think things will work out for me." She knew that this made her a recognizable type on social media—the kind of person who speaks to the universe and expects gratification. "My friends say I have 'A.L.S. lucky-girl syndrome,'" she said. "I still feel like my life is pretty good. I have the best of the worst case, is how I frame it. If you're alive, you're lucky." She told me that she might re-start her Relyvrio regimen, but she seemed unenthusiastic. "The meds are intended to slow progression, but you're always getting worse," she said. "So how do you know?" ♦

PROFILES

ROLE OF A LIFETIME

Why Sarah Jessica Parker keeps playing Carrie Bradshaw.

BY RACHEL SYME

On a recent Thursday afternoon at SJP Collection, a tiny, pink, candle-scented shoe boutique in Manhattan's West Village, the store's owner, the fifty-eight-year-old actress Sarah Jessica Parker, was working the floor. "Stuff the toes with this," she said, holding a wad of tissue paper up to a bride-to-be who was wedding-shoe shopping with her mother. The young woman had selected a pair of white lace Cosettes ($450), a heeled Mary Jane with a rhinestone buckle. Parker was eagerly explaining how to store them between wears. She had on the same design along with her everyday "uniform," a studiously distinctive take on jeans and a T-shirt: 7 for All Mankind denim, a cotton top that she cuts at the neckline and ruches with safety pins, and a charm necklace twisted through the strap of her bra so that the chain falls at her left breast, like an eccentrically long lapel pin. Her highlighted blond hair was pulled back into a tight chignon. She packed the Cosettes into a box and handed them to the women.

"Wear these in good health!" she said, doing the slightest curtsy.

Parker remains best known for her role as Carrie Bradshaw, the twinkly sex columnist in the HBO series "Sex and the City," who had a lustier relationship with Manolo Blahniks than with most of the men she dated. Parker recalled that, when the series concluded after six seasons, in 2004, financiers began "backing up the money trucks," asking her to put her name on a line of shoes. She was not against branding opportunities—a clothing line with the now defunct retailer Steve & Barry's, a fragrance called Lovely—but she considered stilettos a taller order. "I felt honor-bound to produce shoes that I would wear," she said. When she started SJP Collection, in 2014, she partnered with George Malkemus III, who'd helped popularize Manolo Blahniks as the brand's U.S. president, and insisted that the shoes be handmade in Italy. In 2021, Malkemus III died, and though Parker has never taken a "single penny" of salary from the company, she continued designing the shoes herself.

The West Village SJP, which opened in February, is situated on Bleecker Street, the epicenter of "S.A.T.C." fandom. Bus tours bring passengers to buy sweets at Magnolia Bakery, which the series made such a craze that at one point the shop had to enlist a "cupcake bouncer." Around the corner, the Carrie House, whose façade doubled as Carrie's Upper East Side apartment, bears a sign imploring gawkers to stay off the stoop. The West Village today is both more moneyed and more blandly touristy than it was before "S.A.T.C." made it famous. Parker, who lives in the neighborhood and is among its most ardent boosters, said that the shoe store's locale wasn't intentional. Bleecker Street in the twenty-tens became what the *Times* labelled a "luxury blightscape," pockmarked with empty storefronts previously occupied by designer brands, in large part because of the inflated retail bubble that "Sex and the City" helped create. The block has bounced back somewhat, but the pandemic didn't help. Parker said, of the rent there, "It was the most affordable, if you can freakin' believe it." But proximity to the show's other landmarks has made SJP an active stop on the "S.A.T.C." tour (customers who show their vouchers receive ten per cent off on shoes), and by working in the store, which she aims to do weekly, Parker has effectively made herself a bonus attraction. The result is a surreal bit of immersive fan service—emphasis on the "service"—not unlike if Jerry Seinfeld decided to spend his Thursday afternoons waiting tables at Tom's Restaurant.

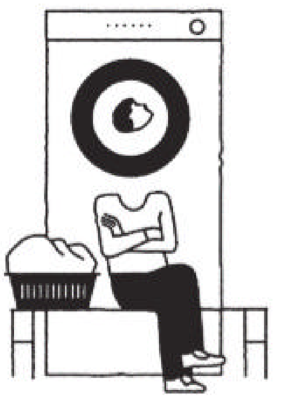
Parker has been acting professionally since the age of eight, though for much of her childhood she was on track to become a professional ballerina. She is an admirer of George Balanchine, the

In all of her professional endeavors, including

the "Sex and the City" franchise, the fifty-eight-year-old actress considers herself a "bitter ender."

PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC

famously exacting late co-founder of New York City Ballet, who would implore his dancers not to be "stingy" by holding back onstage. As both a businesswoman and a performer, Parker likes to feel that she's devoted herself all the way. Her brand extends to winemaking, a luggage line, and even to book publishing, under a new imprint with the independent publisher Zando, SJP Lit. (Her reading taste runs to approachable literary fiction; she named a shoe design for Donna Tartt, the author of one of her favorite novels, "The Goldfinch.") On "Sex and the City," she starred in and narrated every episode, and in the latter seasons also executive-produced. Her workdays could last eighteen hours, and her costume fittings upward of eight. Molly Rogers, who worked with the costume designer Patricia Field on the original "S.A.T.C.," told me, "She tried on so many things once during Season 6 that she rubbed her elbows raw." Parker calls herself a "bitter ender." Performance, in her approach, requires the discipline to stick with it. Even trying on designer clothes can be an act of endurance. She told me she'd welcome the chance to one day lean into her fascination with regimentation and play, against type, the role of a nun.



"Sex and the City" ended almost two decades ago. In the time since, Parker has teamed up with Michael Patrick King, who wrote for and executive-produced the series before adding showrunner to his duties, taking over from Darren Star. Together, Parker and King have made two "S.A.T.C." movies plus "And Just Like That . . . ," a streaming reboot that premièred in 2021 and begins a second season this month. Many critics agree that neither the movies nor the new series has fully recaptured the alchemy of the original, but Parker avoids the discourse. ("No one sends me press clippings," she said. "I don't get reviews, watch reviews, read reviews.") She continues to play Carrie because, as she put it, she finds the material "unmistakably rich," but also out of what seems to be a peculiar sense of responsibility. When the reboot was about to début, in the midst of the pandemic, she described it as a kind of palliative: "The world of Carrie and her friends has always been about coming home, and I felt like we needed that right now," she told *Vogue*. The first season of "And Just Like That" broke a streaming record for HBO Max (now simply called Max). Whether or not we needed it, viewers are following Parker to the bitter end.

At the shoe store, Parker circulated among a dozen or so customers browsing shoes as colorful and carefully arranged as glacéed *macarons*. Teresa Hewgill, a thirty-something hairdresser from Nottingham, England, had been in a cab on her way to the Carrie House when she noticed the SJP awning and decided to drop in.

"Can I help you?" Parker asked.

Hewgill pointed at an ivory Fawn ($350), a four-inch leather pump and the brand's signature style. In an era of athleisure, Parker is selling shoes of a throwback fussy formality. Each style in the collection is accented with a strip of grosgrain fabric down the heel—in the ivory Fawn's case, cherry red.

"I quite liked these," Hewgill said.

Parker asked Hewgill for her size—U.K. 7—and added, "Don't worry, I can do the conversions—if you have the patience, then we have the time." Her voice, forever the voice of Carrie Bradshaw, was girlish. Her demeanor was hyper-attentive. When she spoke, she placed a hand on her collarbone, a gesture of humble entreaty. She disappeared into a basement stockroom and returned with a size 40. Then she squatted down in front of Hewgill.

It is uncanny to watch a person of immense wealth and fame, even a shoe-loving one, choose to cradle a stranger's feet. But Parker was clearly relishing the shopgirl role. "You shouldn't have to struggle this hard," she said, as she tried to coax the shoe over Hewgill's heel. Parker leaped up and pivoted around, leaving a little swirl in the pile of the carpet. (She'd chosen the store's floor-to-ceiling color scheme to evoke the "blushy" hue of a point shoe—one from Freed of London, not Capezio, she made sure to note.) Minutes later, she returned with a stack of boxes and proffered a size 41.

"These are better. . . ." Hewgill said.

"Better or good?" Parker asked. "Don't be afraid to tell me it needs to be better." (Hewgill ultimately bought two pairs of shoes and told me, "That was maybe the best customer service I've ever had.")

Toward the front of the store, spectators had gathered to take photos on their phones. Others stood outside with their faces pressed against the store's windows, like children enthralled by a Macy's Christmas display. An older woman tapped Parker on the back.

"Can I please get a picture with you?" she asked.

"I can't, because I'm working right now," Parker replied, her hand again on her collarbone. But she didn't make fans leave empty-handed. "You are free to take as many pictures of me as you want," she added. "Shoot away!"

A few years ago, while renovating the double-wide town house that she shares with her husband, the actor Matthew Broderick, and their three children, Parker had a salvaged turn-of-the-century sink installed in the foyer as a functional fetish object—Parker is equally fond of cleanliness and of the Victorian aesthetic. The block she lives on, West Eleventh Street, has, according to a recent real-estate story, priced out the "merely wealthy." Yet Parker strives to be seen as unostentatious. She still rides the subway. She plays mah-jongg with an older woman she met at the beach. She likes to be the one asking questions or paying compliments, and she is anxious about inconveniencing anyone. (When I mixed up one of our meeting spots and had to reroute, she blamed herself and apologized repeatedly, even though it was my mistake.) Her mother, Barbara, told me that she always warned Parker not to feel that being an actor entitled her to special treatment. "I just think it doesn't address the point of performing, which is something we do for other people," Barbara said. To this day, Parker seems most at home, as in her shoe store, on the giving end of the exchange with fans. King told me, "She still doesn't really know she's *there* yet. I've seen people faint in front of her, and she cannot really take it in."

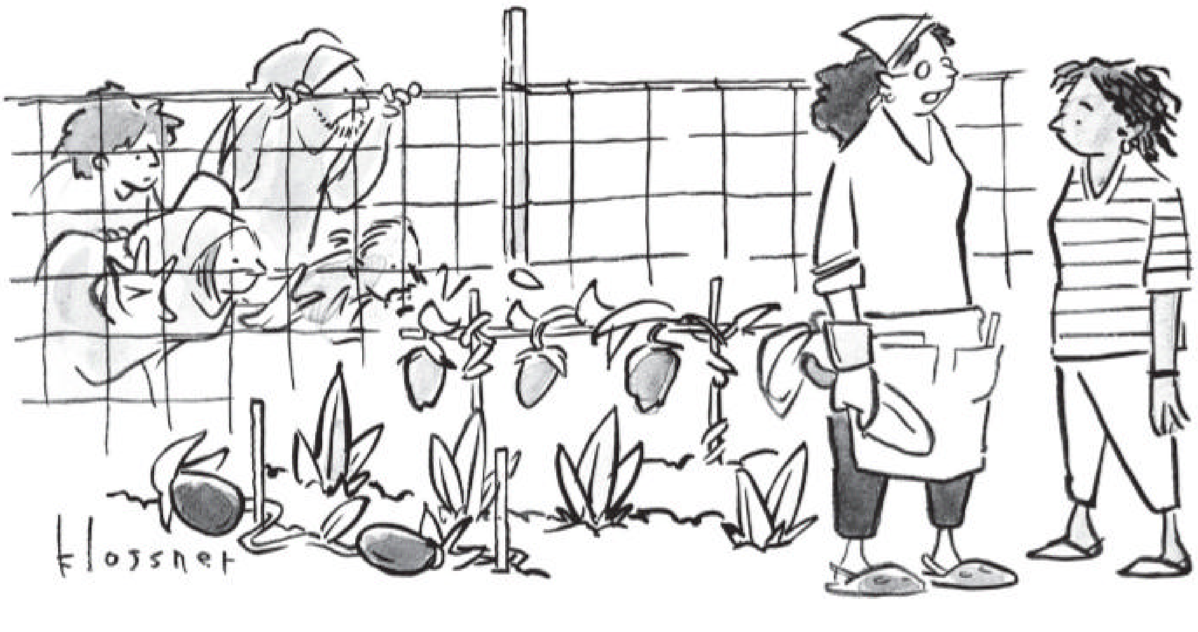
Parker was born in 1965 in Nelsonville, Ohio, and spent her early years in the college town of Athens. Barbara was a schoolteacher. Parker's father, Stephen, was a writer in graduate school. They divorced when Parker was young, and Barbara remarried a theatre student, Paul Forste, who'd been working as a babysitter to Parker and her three older siblings. Paul and Barbara moved with the kids to Cincinnati and eventually had four more children of their own. Barbara stayed home while Paul worked construction jobs and on the crew at a local theatre. Though they were not well off, Barbara was a staunch believer in arts education. Parker and her older brother Toby (who also became a professional actor) studied at the Cincinnati Ballet on full scholarships. Barbara discouraged television and had each child carry a library book when leaving the house. "The kids got free lunches for a while, which was embarrassing," she said. "But I don't think that we ever lived in an impoverished situation where there was no culture."

Parker's first paid job was a starring role in a 1974 NBC adaptation of the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale "The Little Match Girl," which filmed in Cincinnati. Two years later, when she was eleven, she travelled to New York to appear in a Broadway revival of William Archibald's gothic play "The Innocents," directed by Harold Pinter. The renowned British stage actress Claire Bloom was a co-star. Parker recalled, "Her enunciation was exquisite. She would call me to her dressing room and say, 'You can never become a professional, child. I will be very disappointed in you.'" In 1977, Parker and a few of her siblings joined a touring production of "The Sound of Music," with "The Partridge Family" star Shirley Jones in the role of Maria. The same year, Barbara and Paul relocated the family to New York and formally registered with the I.R.S. as the children's managers.

Parker's big break came in 1979, when, on the cusp of her fourteenth birthday, she took over the lead role in the Broadway musical "Annie." New York City at the time was still smarting from a brush with bankruptcy, and the scrappy redheaded orphan was a welcome symbol of resilience. In addition to performing onstage, Parker sang "Tomorrow" on the steps of the New York Public Library as part of an anti-littering campaign, performed on the deck of the U.S.S. Iwo Jima at Bob Hope's birthday spectacular, and was a guest at a Humane Society party at the Rainbow Room, where the dog who played Sandy was served steak tartare. The family lived briefly on Roosevelt Island, and Parker and Toby, who had a part in another Broadway musical, would take the tram into the city by themselves. On two-show days, Parker passed the hours between performances at a pinball arcade. Later, the role of Carrie Bradshaw would make Parker an N.Y.C. poster child. The Bravo host Andy Cohen, a longtime friend, told me, "Walking around with her now is like walking with the Empire State Building." But already, as an adolescent, she seemed drawn to the role of municipal spokesperson. During an appearance on a TV show called "Tinseltown and the Big Apple," she was asked, by a kid reporter, about her favorite things. "I like rainbows a lot," she replied. "And I like New York City."

Like many aspiring actors, however, Parker felt the pull toward Los Angeles. After a year, she left "Annie" and pursued roles on television, including a made-for-TV movie with her future "S.A.T.C." co-star Cynthia Nixon and a CBS sitcom, "Square Pegs," about a pair of nerdy high schoolers. "It was hard for my mom when I left the play," Parker recalled. "TV was a little beneath her." In 1984, she co-starred with Robert Downey, Jr., then an up-and-coming actor, in a teen thriller called "Firstborn," which filmed in New York and New Jersey. The two became a couple and bounced between the East and West Coasts as they pushed to establish themselves. Parker played a spirited sidekick in "Footloose" and a dance-crazed Army brat in "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." Downey, Jr., joined "S.N.L." for a year, in 1985, and landed his breakout role soon afterward, in the Bret Easton Ellis adaptation "Less Than Zero." But he was struggling with substance abuse. Parker did not do drugs and barely drank; she told me that she never felt it "necessary" to have a rebellious phase of any kind. The situation with Downey, Jr., made her feel like a parent at the age of twenty-two. "People around him would be dismissive of me, but I had given him stability and tried to create a steady heartbeat that allowed him to show up on time," she said. "That made me angry and embarrassed me." (Downey, Jr., said, through a representative, that he has "great respect" for Parker.)

She and Downey, Jr., separated in 1991, after seven years together, and Parker moved back to New York. But one of the last films she made in California, the romantic comedy "L.A. Story," helped establish a new niche for her in Hollywood. Parker played opposite Steve Martin as a retail clerk named SanDeE* who exuded a sunny, spring-loaded energy. Martin, who also wrote the film, recalled, "She was the perfect actress for the part, and I think it kind of sent off her career, like, who's that? It was her *cheeriness*, and that's a hard thing to deliver, because it has to be perfectly pitched or it looks weird." Parker recalled that previously she had always played "the friend of the beautiful one," but that, by casting her in "L.A. Story," Martin sent a message: "You are attractive. I'm attracted to you. You can play parts where men find you attractive." Afterward, Parker continued to play variations on what, at the time, was often labelled the bimbo—as a gold digger in "The First Wives Club," or a



"The fence keeps the locavores out."

dim-witted witch in “Hocus Pocus”—though she told me that she never felt stuck “in the saddle of the ditzy blonde.”

ADULT SWIM

Let them eat corn dogs. Let them
peel from its sack a freezer-burnt popsicle,
lime, green as an alien gem.

Let them pluck from the strung garland of chips.

Sugaring their lips with the fine grit
of Sour Patch Kids, these strange children
lift to their mouths those soft little bodies
and chew. They forget, for just a moment, the water
from which they’ve been banished.
Then a pause in the guard station’s country radio—
they pirouette back and begin,
again, to sulk. Gawk. Let them.

It’s nearly time to reclaim
their pool. Each day, each hour,
they have dragged their soaking bodies
from its coolness and allowed their mothers
the reapplication of lotion and the petting
of their wet, tender heads.

No agony is greater
than theirs. Never have I felt so powerful.
Aren’t I magnificent,
floating on my back dead center? Aren’t I
a kingdom of one?
I could grow new gods.
Small princes.

(My grandmother’s voice—*if you own nothing,*
you are nothing—as she handed me, at Christmas,
a fresh certificate of stock. But she was an unhappy woman
and is dead.)

In the summer of 1991, Parker met John F. Kennedy, Jr., at the theatre. He asked her out, and they dated for a few months. Paparazzi trailed them everywhere. In a *Times* profile of Parker not long afterward, she sounded shell-shocked. “I never had any idea what real fame was,” she said, adding, “When I die, they are going to say, ‘Oh, yeah, Sarah once dated John Kennedy.’ ” At the time, Parker still viewed herself primarily as a theatre person. Toby and another brother, Pippin, were the co-founders, with a dozen other downtown actors and writers, of an experimental company, Naked Angels, which operated out of a defunct picture-frame factory on Seventeenth Street. Marisa Tomei, Fisher Stevens, and Gina Gershon were members. “*Everybody* hung around Naked Angels,” Parker recalled—including Matthew Broderick. He had become famous in the cult teen comedy “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off,” but he’d grown up in Greenwich Village as the son of a painter and an actor. In 1983, at twenty-one, he’d won a Tony for his role as a Brooklyn youth in Neil Simon’s family drama “Brighton Beach Memoirs.” He and Parker first met at the movies with Pippin and Broderick’s childhood friend the playwright Kenneth Lonergan. Parker and Broderick were both involved with other people at the time, but they hit it off. Parker, who was three years younger, told me, “I was starstruck. But his fame was quiet. He wore it like a New Yorker.” A few months later, they began dating.

Parker recalled that she still thought of herself as a journeyman, the kind of reliable local actor who remained anonymous enough to stroll down Sixth Avenue unnoticed. In 1995, she garnered rave reviews for playing a hyperactive dog in A. R. Gurney’s play “Sylvia.” (One critic praised the “truth and wit” of her canine impersonation, which she modelled on Broderick’s shepherd mix.) The following year, not long before they were married, Broderick and Parker starred opposite each other in the musical “How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying.” Parker’s close friend, the actor John Benjamin Hickey—who last year directed Parker and Broderick in a Broadway revival of Neil Simon’s “Plaza Suite,” which will travel to London’s West End next year—told me, “Our lives together have been a life of acting and actors and the theatre.”

In 1997, however, Parker got a message from Darren Star, the creator of the prime-time soap operas “Melrose Place” and “Beverly Hills, 90210.” He was working on a new half-hour series for HBO about four thirtysomething single women living in Manhattan, adapted from a New York *Observer* column turned book by Candace Bushnell (who used Carrie as a pseudonym). A fan of Parker’s work in “Sylvia” and in the movies, Star had written the lead role with her in mind. But Parker was ending a starring run in “Once Upon a Mattress,” on Broadway, and was leery of committing to daily life on a soundstage. “I wanted to be able to do a play, and then a reading, and then a TV movie of the week in Yugoslavia,” she said. Parker and Star met at an Upper East Side café to discuss the pilot. Star told me, “I remember her saying, ‘Matthew read it. And he said that if I do this I might become *too* famous.’ ”

Parker said that part of what persuaded her was the strength of Star’s pilot script, the last scene in particular. Carrie and the sly bachelor Mr. Big have had a string of chance encounters, and at the end of the episode he gives her a ride home in his town car. When she gets out, she taps

A whinny of pain
from a skinned knee, quick flash
of white before the blood. Not my wound
to treat. Another boy explaining to his mother's magazine
how every day, every single day,
God puts out the sun by dunking it in the ocean.
Like a match dropped
into a glass.

Where does the next one come from,
he wants to know.

One up to his thighs already
until the strict whistle, the chorus
of booing beside him,
a leap back.
Lined on the plastic rim, the boys stare differently
than the men they will become.

Where are the wild things?

The boy worries.
Who promises tomorrows to a whole needful planet,
restrikes that match?

Who bears that next fiery sphere?

Who will remind this woman
she's not some queen
acquiring a country estate—ruby brooches, oiled leaves
of topiaries glistening in midday sun—
while the real rural citizens starve. Fountains
upon fountains and a small pond
to reflect back her dais. Crystal plates
of petit fours. For which,
history admonishes, she was beheaded.

—*Corey Van Landingham*

on his window and asks, "Have you ever been in love?" He answers with a grin, as the car speeds away: "Absofuckinglutely." The final shot shows Carrie standing solo on the misty street. It is an ambivalent image—some might see the lonely side of urban life, or the spectre of romantic rejection—but Parker saw in it "all these possibilities." She told me, "It's New York. It's this girl."

Parker has a publicity team and a personal assistant, but she arranged all of our meetings herself, tossing out stylish restaurant suggestions—Daniel Boulud's wine bar, a new Persian spot in Bushwick—with proposed dates and times, like a Holly Golightly with a bullet journal. Her way of text messaging was self-consciously polished and a bit theatrical. One day, when she couldn't figure out how to insert the circumflexes into "tête-a-tête," she texted, "Missing the wee hat!" She signed every communiqué with a single air-kiss: "X."

I'd asked a few times to visit Parker at home, but she said that letting a reporter into family life is something that she and Broderick have "never done." She added, "I don't make proclamations about my marriage. I don't talk about my kids." In May, we met instead at one of her favorite West Village restaurants, Café Cluny, a Franco-American bistro on a cobblestoned corner two blocks from her house. She'd called in advance to ask for a quiet place to talk, so management had blocked off one side of the outdoor dining area, leaving a half-dozen tables next to ours empty. But Parker seemed committed to the illusion that she was just a regular customer.

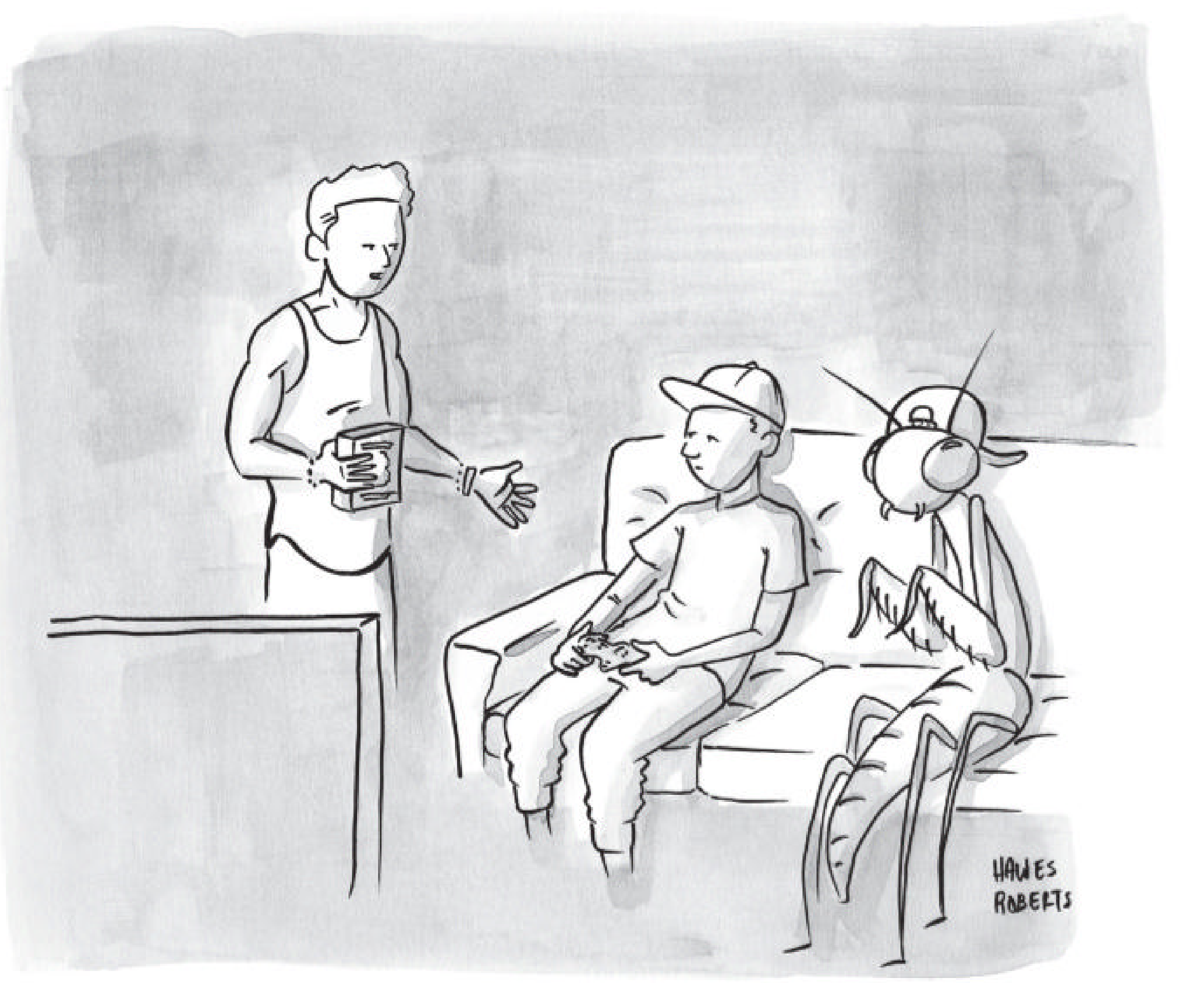
A server popped in to pour us water. "I have a crazy question," Parker said. "If I sit and wait, will there be a tuna burger soon?"

The server said that it would be available at eleven-thirty. It was just after eleven.

"Oh, I can wait!" Parker said. She also ordered a brûléed grapefruit and French onion soup—hold the parsley. Parker hates the herb, and, like Carrie, whom she gave the same aversion, she often fibs and says that she's allergic to insure that her request is honored.

Many of Parker's other proclivities made it into "Sex and the City." Like Parker, who wasn't allowed much candy as a kid, Carrie loves sweets—bubble gum, Twizzlers, strawberry milkshakes. Like Parker, she avoids curse words. ("I don't like how it sounds on me," Parker said. "There's a million other choices you can make.") But Parker's biggest effect on the character might be a matter of tone. Bushnell's writing had a jaded quality. Her New York was glamorous and exciting but essentially Darwinian. In her book, she wrote, "We are all kept men and women—by our jobs, by our apartments, and then some of us by the pecking order at Mortimers and the Royalton, by Hamptons beachfront, by front-row Garden tickets—and we like it that way." Bushnell told me that Parker struck her as in some ways the character's opposite. "She's never really been a single woman," Bushnell said. "She's always been successful." But Star felt it was important that the lead actress be able to bring congeniality to the edgy material. "Sarah Jessica projects a lot of warmth," he told me, drawing a comparison between Parker and another iconic TV good girl, Mary Tyler Moore.

Carrie and the other women of "S.A.T.C."—the Waspy art gallerina Charlotte York (Kristin Davis), the pragmatic lawyer Miranda Hobbes (Nixon), and the uninhibited publicist Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall)—chain-smoked, caroused, got bikini waxes, and dished



"Is one of you biting the heads off the Teddy Grahams and leaving the bodies in the box?"

• •

around the brunch table about "tuchus lingus," the taste of semen, and errant flatulence. Parker told me that such things were "completely unfamiliar" to her. "That just was not how I conducted conversations," she said. (She did, for a time, smoke cigarettes.) She'd never done nudity professionally, and she told Star that she didn't intend to. Even now, she sounds somewhat confounded by Carrie's life style. "I could never do any of that stuff in my life," she said. "It would be immoral. It would be unprincipled. An affair, husbands, kissing, buying, drinking—whims, whims, whims!" But she connected with the idea of Carrie as one in a long line of female strivers searching for their place in the metropolis, from the secretaries of Rona Jaffe's novel "The Best of Everything" to Marlo Thomas's plucky heroine in the sitcom "That Girl." Parker said, "There is a buoyancy to what I'm talking about that makes you excited about a life here."

There is a natural lightness to Parker's physicality onscreen—she recalled that on the set of "L.A. Story" the director, Mick Jackson, would begin takes by chanting, "Bounce, Sarah Jessica, bounce!"—though it is a lightness born of exertion. When we were walking together one day, she demonstrated the difference between her natural gait—pin straight, delicate, quick—and Carrie's, which has an ambling bravado. Petite but long-legged, Parker pulled off even Patricia Field's most iconoclastic costuming choices: a miniskirt with a bunny tail, an Alpine dirndl, a belt wrapped around a bare midriff. John Corbett, who played Carrie's boyfriend Aidan in the original series and is brought back in the upcoming season of "And Just Like That," told me, "She looks like she's in a Bob Fosse show. She's my favorite actor to fucking *watch*."

Julia Louis-Dreyfus defined the character of Elaine on "Seinfeld" with what Ariel Levy, in a *New Yorker* Profile, called "the shove," an aggressive gesture by a woman asserting herself among the boys. If there is one action that similarly epitomizes Carrie Bradshaw—her eagerness, her self-sabotage, her moony relationship to skyscrapers—it is the trip. Parker is a precise and charismatic slapstick comedian. In the show's famous intro sequence, she wobbles like a fawn, in a tutu, as a passing bus splashes her with gutter water. Elsewhere in the series, she kersplats backward into a mud pit at a country cabin; skids belly first across the polished floor of a Dior boutique like a penguin on an ice floe; and, in what might be the show's funniest episode, wipes out dramatically while strutting down a fashion runway, prompting her friend Stanford (the late Willie Garson) to scream, "She's fashion roadkill!" Parker told me that she learned how to trip from Broderick, who is a silent-film fanatic. "You walk in front of yourself and then force yourself to fall," she said, adding, "I know exactly where my shoes are going to land." Like Tom Cruise, who does his own stunts for "Mission: Impossible," Parker welcomes the physical effort of embodying Carrie. Could Cruise run several blocks in Louboutin mules? For one such scene of "S.A.T.C.," Parker refused the offer of a body double. "You have to remember, I was a ballet dancer. I've got bad stuff all over my feet now, huge marks and bumps. But it's a badge of honor. If we are shooting in February for a scene that takes place in June and I'm in a little dress, what, am I gonna wear a *coat*?"

Parker became more involved in overseeing "S.A.T.C." as it went on, especially after King took over as showrunner. The series had become a hit by then—Richard Plepler, the former C.E.O. of HBO, liked to call the audience the "gang of ten million"—and the on-location shoots were mobbed by paparazzi and crowds of fans. The show's budget ballooned, and its look became glossier. Most of the clothes the cast wore in the first season were bought on consignment or off the rack at Bloomingdale's and Century 21. The two-part series finale, shot in Paris, featured Parker in a couture gown lent by Versace and worth a reported eighty thousand dollars.

"Sex and the City" was hotly debated from the outset. Some viewers endorsed it as a fresh feminist text. (Camille Paglia called the show's success a "victory.") Others dismissed it as a materialist fantasy. Plenty of the commentary was tinged with sexism: Was it too frivolous? Too slutty? One of the most divisive aspects of the series, even among fans, was its conventional dénouement: Carrie ends up with Big, and all the other protagonists happily pair off with men. Bushnell has not been shy about pointing out that this conclusion ran counter to the real experience of the women she was writing about. (In a *New Yorker* interview last year, she said, "TV has its own logic.") But over time the series was increasingly recognized as a pioneer of the kind of ambitious, thorny programming that defined the so-called golden age of cable. No matter how much Parker sparkled in the role, Carrie was always a character defined by her flaws.

After "S.A.T.C.," Parker played a conservative career woman in the winsome holiday movie "The Family Stone" (2005), and did a string of formulaic rom-coms. Her biggest movies, by far, were the two "S.A.T.C." sequels. The first, a sporadically entertaining (and very expensive) franchise extension from 2008, earned more than four hundred million dollars at the box office. The second, released in 2010, featured the women on a luxury getaway to Abu Dhabi, where they were tended to by manservants and clumsily debated modest fashion. It also performed well but was a critical fiasco. (In the *Times*, A. O. Scott wrote that the film emanated "the ugly smell of unexamined privilege.") Attempts to get a third movie off the ground, in 2018, collapsed amid rumors of a contractual dispute between Cattrall and the studio. Cattrall, who declined to be interviewed for this story, has since aired various grievances in the press and on social media, among them that she had played the part of Samantha "past the finish line." Even Nixon, who is close friends with Parker, and gladly returned to play Miranda on "And Just Like That" after a run for New York governor, told me that she's been surprised by the franchise's longevity. "I thought it was done after the first movie," she said. "I always think it's done."

For many performers, a career-defining role can be an albatross. In the twenty-tens, through her production company, Pretty Matches, Parker developed and starred in an HBO dramedy, "Divorce," which ran for three seasons. She recruited the Irish actress and producer Sharon Horgan to write the pilot. The character was an upstate mom whose marriage was unravelling. The tone was understated. Critics liked the show, but it never quite caught on. Parker said, "I think it was just really hard for people to allow me to be somebody who isn't joyfully tripping through Manhattan with opportunity." At the same time, she has never felt a strong urge to escape her association with Carrie Bradshaw, perhaps because for Parker the outcome of whatever she's making matters less than endeavoring to make it. She prefers not to watch herself onscreen, and to this day hasn't seen many "S.A.T.C." episodes. She has a mental archive of seemingly every garment she wore on the show—and, thanks to a clause in her contract, has most of the actual garments, too, in cold storage—but is hazy on entire characters and storylines. She told me, "I keep working, and some of it is successful and some of it isn't. And that's the career I imagined."

In the early months of sheltering from COVID, Parker's twin daughters, Tabitha and Loretta, who turn fourteen in June, passed the time binge-watching old episodes of "The Bob Newhart Show." Parker told me, "We were so happy hearing that theme song. I started realizing, Oh, my gosh, you know, we're all so nostalgic." A younger generation of viewers was discovering the "Sex and the City" back catalogue through streaming. There were new fans to serve. She called up Michael Patrick King with the same idea that many restless entertainers were having at the time: Why don't we start a podcast? They would chat through each episode of the original series chronologically. "It would be like the laminate you get at a Barbra Streisand concert—backstage, all access, everything," Parker said. Before they were set to tape, however, the pair had another notion. She recalled, "We started thinking, Wait, is this the time to go back to TV?"

King began writing "And Just Like That" during the summer of 2020, in the midst of the nation's reckoning with racial injustice. In the original "S.A.T.C.," the four women rarely stepped outside of their white, wealthy world. When Miranda moved to Brooklyn, in the final season, the friends mourned as if she were going to war. King told me, "When 'And Just Like That' happened, there were two topics in the city: race and gender. There was no way in hell these characters were going to come back without being current." He and Parker agreed that any reboot—they prefer the term "new chapter"—would have to "break the old show."

In "And Just Like That," heterosexual men are no longer the focal point of the protagonists' lives. At the end of Episode 1, in a deus ex machina fit for the pandemic, Mr. Big dies of a heart attack while working out on his Peloton. (In 2021, the actor who played Big, Chris Noth, was accused of sexual assault by multiple women—he denied the claims—but Parker told me that the plan to kill off the character dated back to the thwarted third movie, because, for creative reasons, "Michael did not want Carrie to be married anymore.") Miranda's husband, Steve, once a virile nice guy, is now sexless and hard of hearing. In place of men, the show introduces a group of female and nonbinary characters of color to shake up the lives of Carrie, Miranda, and Charlotte. (Samantha is heard from only via text message, from her new home in London.) Where the original "S.A.T.C." was fizzy and irreverent, and markedly nonjudgmental about the women's most outrageous choices, the new show is preoccupied with what is socially and morally acceptable. Miranda soon leaves Steve for Che Diaz (Sara Ramirez), a self-professed "queer, nonbinary Mexican Irish diva," who does anodyne identity-based standup comedy. In one scene, Carrie frets over whether to buy a sari to accompany her new friend Seema Patel (Sarita Choudhury) to a Diwali celebration. "Is that allowed?" she asks, literally wringing her hands. The series struck many critics as a cringey apologia. Aisha Harris, at NPR, wrote that the creators seemed to be confronting past criticism of "S.A.T.C." "like items on a to-do list."

One hallmark of the original series was its schematic form. Carrie narrated each episode as she put together a new column, and the strands of action were braided into a central theme, whether it was conflicted promiscuity ("Are We Sluts?"), impossible beauty standards ("Attack of the 5′10″ Woman"), or how sensitive some men can be about their testicles ("Belles of the Balls," which, like all "Sex and the City" episodes, featured a sack of shameless puns). As in a classic screwball comedy, the contrivances were part of the pleasure. "And Just Like That" has a looser architecture by design. King said that one of his first decisions was to discard Carrie's running voice-overs. He told me, "Carrie's not telling you what to think, so it's more dangerous." If "S.A.T.C." was a show about blustery cosmopolitan confidence, "And

Just Like That" is one about facing down confusion. The middle-aged women seem more eager to admit their haplessness than they ever were as thirtysomethings.

One morning in April, I went to watch Parker and King work on new episodes of "And Just Like That" in an editing suite near Penn Station. Parker sat cross-legged on a gray love seat. King, a tall redhead with pointy features, sat beside her. Parker told me that the two grew close before Darren Star departed as showrunner. "It was almost an arranged marriage," she recalled, adding, of Star, "He was setting the table so that we wouldn't feel, or I wouldn't feel, untethered or without a partner." Parker and King have worked side by side on the franchise ever since. (Star has moved on to, among other projects, the "S.A.T.C."-lite Netflix series "Emily in Paris.") Parker is a bitter ender personnel-wise; she has had the same agent, financial adviser, lawyer, and hairdresser for decades. An animal trainer who worked with the dog in "Annie" now handles Charlotte's English bulldog on "And Just Like That." In the suite, Michael Berenbaum, an editor of both "S.A.T.C." and the new series, pulled up a scene from Episode 3 of the new season. In it, Carrie is in a recording studio tracking the audiobook for a memoir she's written about becoming a widow. King was worried that the orchestral score underneath was too maudlin.

"S.J. is our preview audience," he said.

"I always think it's better when the words are doing the work," Parker replied. "If we have to layer it with music, it feels like we're fearing that we're falling short."

Parker is, by all accounts, an energetic presence on set. She likes to kibbitz with crew members but is careful to keep people on schedule. On Wednesdays, a production assistant prints out her lines for the following week's filming, and she sets about memorizing them as if there were a pop quiz coming. She expects the same of other cast members. "Freedom comes from preparation," she likes to say. She arrives on set early to plot out routine prop work—talking on the phone, eating Chinese food, lighting a cigarette—with military-grade precision. "I say to everybody, 'I hope you brought a book, because I'm going to need to figure this out,'" she told me. While filming a scene earlier this year, she noticed an off-kilter buttonhole in the costume of an actor playing a bit part and halted filming to fix it. Choudhury, who was also in the scene, said that working on the show can feel "like doing mathematics." She added, "People come up to us, like, 'Oh my God, it must be so much fun,' and it is, but not in the way they think." I asked Parker whether the people she works with complain about her punctiliousness. "Not to my face," she replied, "but I wouldn't be surprised."

King and Parker watched the audiobook scene through with and without the music.

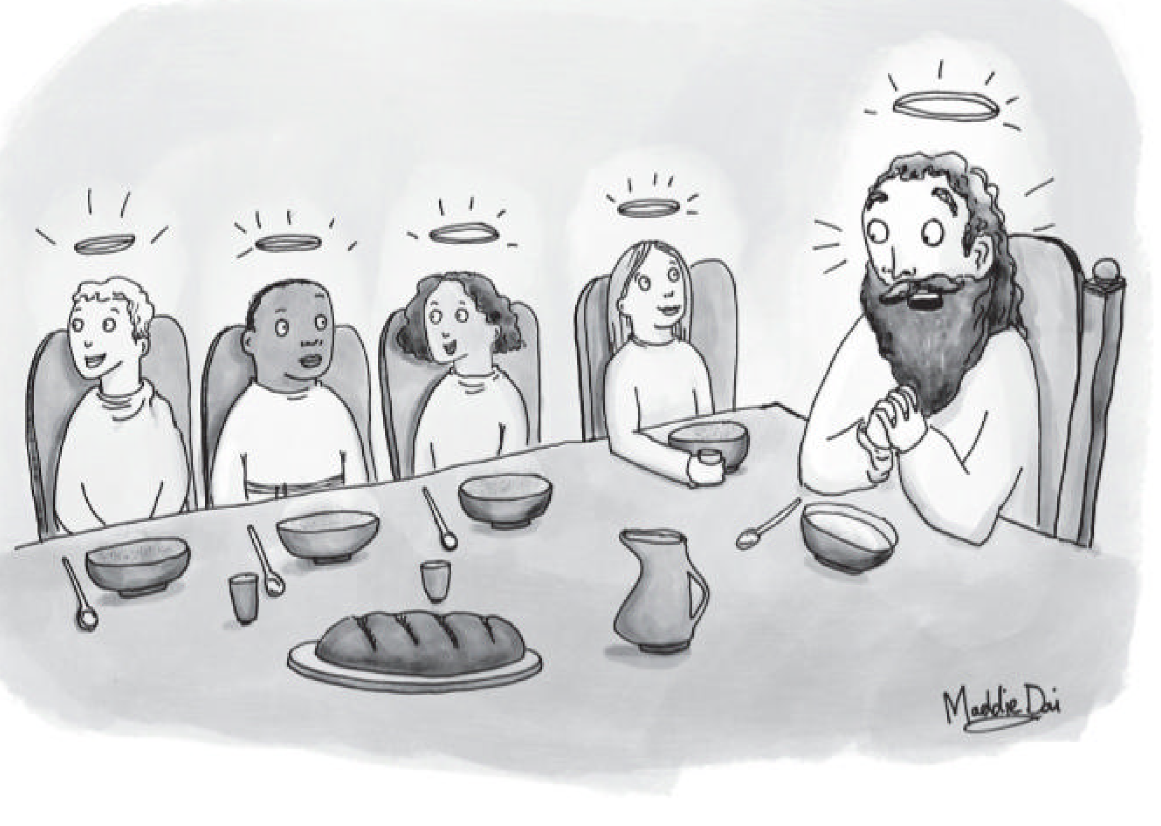
"Why could I not hear my knuckle crack in the silent one?" Parker said.

"It's the exact same performance," King replied.

"Did you hear the knuckle, Rachel?" Parker asked me. They played the score-free version again, and Parker gave a satisfied nod when she heard the pop.

When "And Just Like That" premièred, some fans were outraged that Samantha had been written out. Cattrall claimed in an interview that she'd learned about the new show on social media, "like everyone else." Parker told me, "We felt like it had been made clear by her that this was not a character she wanted to revisit." In Season 1, Samantha is estranged from the other friends. Her text messages from London are infrequent and terse. But in May *Variety* leaked the news that Cattrall would be returning in the Season 2 finale, for a phone-conversation scene that she'd filmed "without seeing or speaking with" her co-stars. The tabloids scoured the story for evidence of acrimony. As in the past, Parker has practiced a tight-lipped diplomacy. "It's the weirdest thing, to be told we're in a catfight," she said to me. "I would never speak poorly about Kim. I just wouldn't." Parker said that King had "begged" her not to discuss the Cattrall cameo, but she did admit, "I am in the scene."

I've seen most episodes of "And Just Like That" Season 2, and though they include some dreary stabs at topical relevance (can Tony Danza, an Italian American, play Che Diaz's father in a sitcom?), the series over all is showing flashes of the original's raunchy verve. Miranda enjoys adventures in "pegging." Carrie advises Charlotte with some thoughtful musings on "jizz." Like a Marvel movie or a Taylor Swift album, the show plants Easter eggs to titillate devotees. In Episode 1, Carrie is planning to attend the Met Gala, the annual fashion-world soirée, and, owing to a seamstress shortage, she ends up wearing her Vivienne Westwood wedding gown from the first "S.A.T.C." movie. Every episode of the new series ends with a single line of voice-over that begins, "And just like that. . . ." As Carrie steps onto her stoop, she narrates, "And just like that I repurposed



"Do you think everyone hangs out with me because I'm cool and funny, or because I'm God?"

my pain.” It is a signal that the show is trying to move on, into a less encumbered phase, though it can be hard, as the “S.A.T.C.” franchise presses ahead, to tell the difference between moving forward and circling back.

In the editing suite, King played another scene from Episode 3, in which Carrie returns home after an orgiastic round of shoe shopping. In one boffo motion, she kicks open her apartment door with a heeled foot, squeezes through with half a dozen bags, tosses her keys toward a glass bowl, and tumbles onto the floor.

Parker was shielding her eyes with one hand. “She hates this part,” King said.

In a later scene, Carrie unpacks one of her new purchases, a Loewe sandal that is white and dainty except for a garish red balloon-shaped object wedged under the front strap.

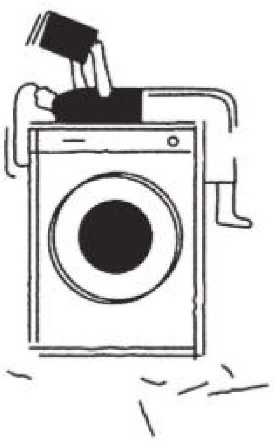
“We picked the most decadent, the most unnecessary, the most impractical,” Parker said, of the shoe.

“It makes you stop and have a judgment,” King said. “You’re *involved* now.”

I squinted back at the screen as Carrie strained to get the preposterous thing onto her foot.

“That look on your face,” King said to me. “*That’s* our show.”

Even in the heady early two-thousands, when Carrie Bradshaw was writing freelance for four-fifty a word, it was fantasy that a single newspaper columnist could afford a life of non-stop designer handbags and taxicabs. For most transplants, of course, New York is a grinding place. Rent is extortionate. The subways are erratic. As soon as the weather gets warm, the smell of garbage is merciless. Part of moving here is undergoing a process of disenchantment. Parker, like Carrie, seems to have bypassed that step. From the charmed perch she has long occupied, even the city’s lowliest flourishes remain lovable—including, she once joked to Jay Leno, the dog poop underfoot. When I was with her one day on the boardwalk in Coney Island, she delighted at the sight of an old-fashioned trash can and said that she was trying to persuade the city to sell her a decommissioned one for her town house. At Parker’s suggestion, one episode of “S.A.T.C.” featured a shot of an employee at a Gray’s Papaya hot-dog shop wearing a button bearing the establishment’s ironic slogan: “Polite New Yorker.” For Parker, the word lacks its oxymoronic edge. Though she does not oblige requests for selfies, she often offers to chat with her fans on the street. Broderick quipped, “Sometimes I’m, like, ‘Why don’t you just take the picture, then you won’t have to stop and hear how important your show is?’ ” But for Parker the entire city is a souvenir shop, and her own attention is a trinket she can bestow like an I♥N.Y. mug. If you would just put down your phone and talk to her, *really* talk to her, she will remember your name “forever” and maybe even tell you the best place to get a hot pretzel. For the record, Parker says that it’s Sabrett stands, which in her description sounds no less enchanting than a French pâtisserie: “Hot dogs in the summer. Chestnuts in the winter.”



On a placid evening in April, I joined Parker for the opening night of the spring season of New York City Ballet, where she has been on the board for more than a decade. What does one wear to a ballet première with a woman who once wore a foot-high Nativity Scene headpiece to the Met Gala? I chose a frilly blue cocktail dress and a bejewelled choker necklace. When I met Parker before the show, at the restaurant Tatiana, on Lincoln Plaza, she was reading a dog-eared book manuscript and wearing jeans with one of Broderick’s old button-down shirts—the dress code, perhaps, of someone for whom the ballet is as ordinary as a hot-dog lunch. She seemed to sense my embarrassment. “You make me want to run home and change!” she said, and for the rest of the night she overcompensated by telling me how “pretty” I looked.

We sat in a corner of the packed dining room. Parker ordered a cocktail, but declared it too strong after one sip. She told me that she didn’t try a “real cosmopolitan” until after “S.A.T.C.” ended—though, through a beverage company that she co-founded, she recently started selling a canned version, the Perfect Cosmo by SJP. Seated next to us was a group of four older women who were having dinner before the opera—a preview of “S.A.T.C.” octogenarians’ edition. (Let’s not rule it out.) As they got up to leave, Parker chatted with one of them.

“You look beautiful! I noticed you right away,” she said to the woman, who was putting on a fur coat. Then, pointing to me, she added, “Can you believe how nicely she’s dressed for the ballet?”

As a teen-ager, Parker studied for two years at the American Ballet Theatre, N.Y.C.B.’s rival company. “I have dreams all the time that I’m still dancing,” she said. It was her idea to cast the celebrated Soviet-émigré ballet dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov as Carrie’s love interest in the final season of “S.A.T.C.” “I was here when Misha defected and came to America,” she said. “Everyone was carrying a bag with him on it that said ‘Gotta Dance.’ New York *was* ballet.”

When we got to the theatre, an usher directed us to the front row of the mezzanine. “I can’t believe we got these seats!” Parker said.

“You’re on the board,” I said, a bit surprised that she was surprised.

“Yes, but they are *really* good seats!” she said.

The evening’s program was “All Balanchine,” beginning with a spritely number set to Bach’s “Concerto Barocco.” Parker, who still has a ballerina’s posture, peered down at the stage through a pair of chunky binoculars. She was chewing a piece of bubble gum, and during the dancer’s most demanding moves she murmured appreciatively. The second ballet was set to “Kammermusik No. 2,” a frenetic chamber piece by the German composer Paul Hindemith. Balanchine’s choreography involves the two lead ballerinas performing the same movements a count apart; one of Balanchine’s biographers described it as among his “least ingratiating” works. A few minutes into the piece, Mira Nadon, a new principal, lost her footing and stumbled out of a series of turns. Parker squeezed my thigh and gasped. “That was not supposed to happen,” she whispered. Per the choreography, Nadon exited the stage briefly a minute later, and when she bounded back from the wings she had a smile plastered on her face. At intermission, Parker was still thinking about Nadon’s misstep. She told me, “I just hope there’s someone backstage saying to her, ‘It’s a rite of passage.’ ” ♦

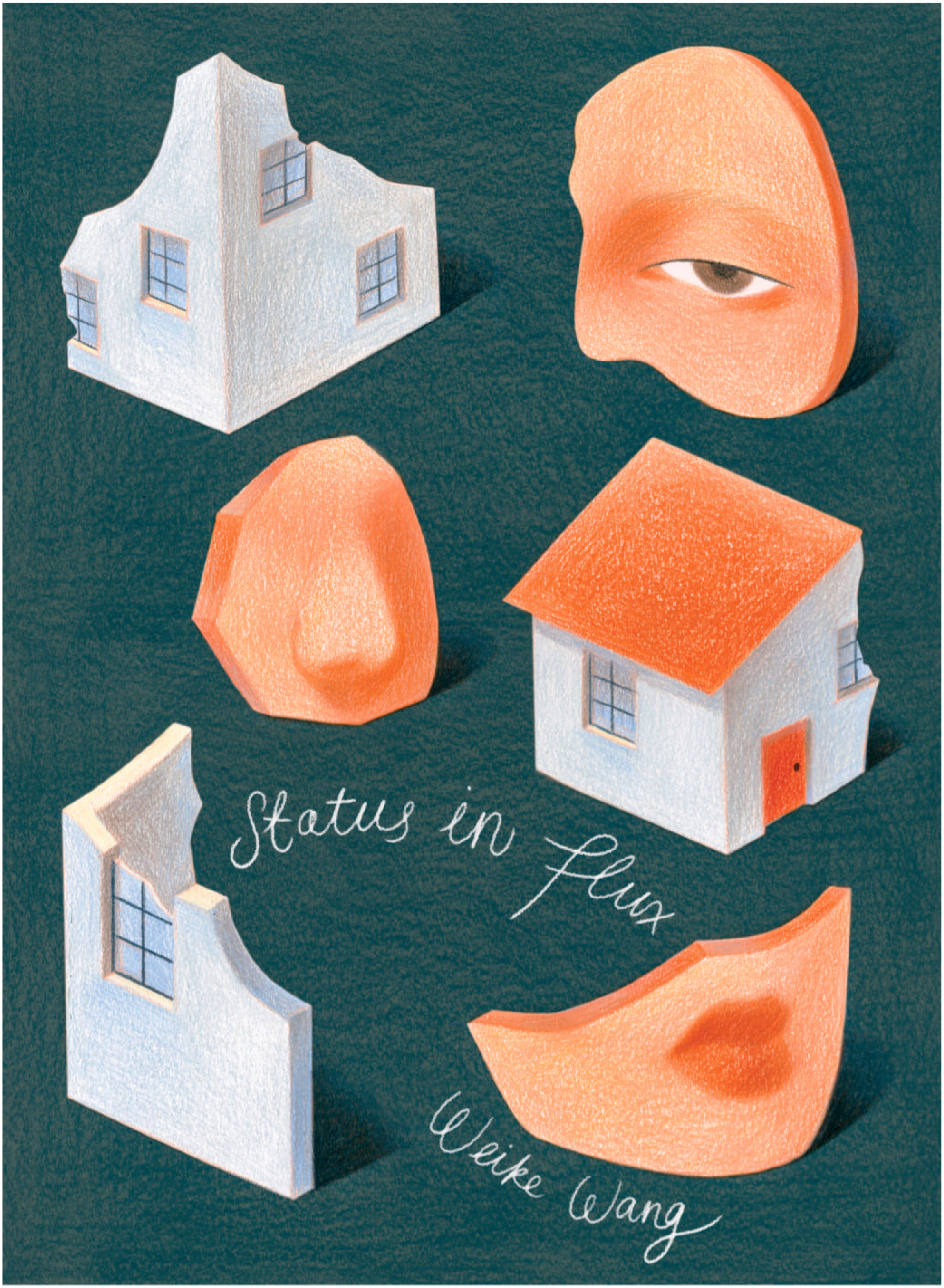

Status in flux
Weike Wang

ILLUSTRATION BY JIAYUE LI

For two years, no one travelled. Countries closed their borders to other countries that had closed their borders first. When borders reopened, everyone began travelling again, in full force. There would always be another variant. Best to see the world while you could. Around this time, I developed insomnia and began driving by myself at night. The first night, I drove to a twenty-four-hour supermarket. I stood in front of the frozen-food section, occasionally opening a freezer door to grab something, then changing my mind.

It was not that, in year three, I couldn't travel, but to do so was ill-advised. My husband was an American citizen, and we lived in New Jersey. Renewing my work visa yet again seemed like a complete waste of everyone's time, so we'd hired a lawyer for my green-card process and, in one of the six-minute phone slots we had with her, she told me to stay put during the period between the application submission and the interview. I could travel within the U.S., but leaving the country was tricky. My husband asked how long we would have to stay put. The lawyer said that the average case took at least eleven months now, since the prior Administration had stalled many green cards, since the prior Administration had wished to limit immigration from certain countries. I reminded the lawyer that I was Canadian, and she said that to leave the country and try to come back was to risk being held up at customs for not having a clear residency status in either Canada or the U.S. Once we submit these forms, she said, your status will be in flux.

The lawyer also emphasized that I absolutely could not quit my job during the application process. The company I worked for had already submitted proof of employment. If I quit, the company would rescind the form and my application would be far less strong.

In addition to the forms, we had to provide: photographs of ourselves and my work visas; our marriage license and birth certificates; notarized letters confirming that our marriage was genuine; and the sealed results of a medical exam showing that I was thoroughly vaccinated and not a carrier of any communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, syphilis, or gonorrhea. Grad school was my sole reason for coming to this country, and had I not met my husband I would not have stayed. Now it was as if, through him, I were trying to steal status or jump the line.

On each form, we triple-checked dates, addresses, and the spellings of our names. One form was titled "Petition for Alien Relative." Another: "Application for Advance Parole" ("parole" allowing me to travel for absolute emergencies, which the lawyer said to avoid). So it wasn't just that I *felt* both alien and criminal: the words were plainly there.

The lawyer mentioned possible complications that could lead to delays. Although I had Canadian citizenship, I was born in China. The green card would open my route to American citizenship, and I might end up a citizen of two countries, neither of which was my birthplace. In an annoyed-male voice, my husband asked why that would be a complication. In an annoyed-female voice, our lawyer replied, I don't make the rules. Just anticipate delays.

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My husband never had insomnia. He slept soundly through the night, every night, and that made me want to kick him—like, with both feet on his back, propelling him off the bed and onto the floor. Once I'd had that thought, I put on a jacket and got into the car. At the supermarket again, I decided on frozen pizzas. I bought seven, of varying crust thickness. I thought maybe, as a fun activity, we could eat only pizza for a week, going from thin-crust to deep-dish. The boxes barely fit in our freezer, which meant that we had to go from deep-dish to thin-crust. When I handed my husband a two-inch-thick pepperoni slice the next morning, he told me to stop night driving. It was incredibly unsafe. What if you get mugged in the parking lot? he said. What if a shooter comes in? But I'd already thought of that possibility. If a shooter came to that specific supermarket at 1 A.M., I would launch myself over the deli counter and hide behind the meats.

My parents still lived in Ontario, in the city of London, just north of Lake Erie, a two-hour drive from Detroit. When I told people where I was from, I made sure to say Ontario, and not London, to avoid having them think that I meant the other London, where more people were from. When my parents and I were naturalized in Canada, a man in uniform took our Chinese passports and punched holes through them, all along the bottom. I was not yet eighteen, and my parents instructed me on the benefits of naturalization. To work or travel or buy property as a Canadian citizen was infinitely easier than doing so as a Chinese one. And, if I married a Canadian, I would not need him for citizenship; I would already have it.

I was driving during the daytime, like a normal person, when my parents called from Buenos Aires, prior to embarking on a two-thousand-person cruise. Retired, they now used their savings to voyage the world and were finally off to see Antarctica before it melted down to a nub. *Wei*? they said in unison for "hello." *Wei*? *Wei*? *Wei*? Until I said *wei* back. Then they wanted to know what my lawyer had said and when we could all fly to China to visit my last living grandparent, a woman well into her nineties, who had held on through several lockdowns, per my mother, in order to see me, my cousins, and my parents in the same room one last time, an event that had not occurred since I was a child. After I told them what the lawyer had said, they sighed in unison. Why I had chosen to stay in America after grad school was beyond them. Yes, the pay was better, but the health insurance was much worse. I said, My job is here. My husband. Friends. But did it ever occur to your husband, asked my father—who only ever referred to my husband as "your husband," never Matt, his official name—did it ever occur to your husband to move to Canada, where, in thirty years, everyone will be moving, because climate change will make so much of America uninhabitable? I didn't have a response to that. *Wei*? my father said, after too much time had passed.

My father was against the green card and, on principle, dual citizenship. Why did China not allow dual citizenship? Because that country knew what he knew: you're either in or you're out. There's no such thing as sharing first place. The fact that dual citizenship conferred the right to vote in two countries made him nervous. One person shouldn't get two votes when so many have none. My parents had no desire to move to the U.S. All they saw on the news were the crazy elections, the guns, and the perpetual droughts and floods in California—the only state they liked, for its gorgeous coastline. Jersey rarely had disasters like that, I explained. You didn't even have to pump your own gas. There was always a Wawa or a highway to take you out of Jersey, to anywhere else you liked. *Wei wei*? my father asked, and I said, No, Wawa.

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Matt had a sister, younger by ten years. She was my Gen Z sister-in-law, who, when happy, snapped her fingers silently and said, Slay. Soon after Europe reopened, she gave herself a six-month sabbatical in Spain. By "sabbatical," she meant that she had quit her job abruptly, and six months was the length of time she could afford to travel before she had to find another job. She wished to become fluent in Spanish while volunteer-teaching English. My husband asked how she was going to get fluent in another language when she spent most of the time speaking the one she already knew. His sister asked why he had to be like that when she was already low-key stressed. Until the lawyer said that we shouldn't travel, the plan had been for us to visit her and for my husband to slip her a thick envelope of cash, metaphorically, through Venmo, which would then allow her more months in which to become fluent. I loved this about my husband. The big gestures. The soft heart.

Naturalization was a big gesture, and, once my green-card application was in, my husband told his parents, and his parents drove across two states that day to take us out to lunch. At lunch, my mother-in-law had a glow and spoke of how pleased she was that I was coming into the family, though Matt and I had already been married for two years, and had dated for five years before that. She asked if a green card was actually green and I said that it was a muted, tasteful green, like sage, but, formally, it was called a certificate of alien registration, and was granted only to little green men with abnormally large heads. The joke landed badly, and my new family stared at me. You're not a man, my mother-in-law huffed. You're an accomplished young woman with a reasonably sized head. She added that, once the bureaucratic bullshit was over, she would like us all to go to Portugal, where she thought we had some lineage, having just got her results from Ancestry.com. I told my mother-in-law that I had no Portuguese ancestors, and she asked how I could be so sure. Had I done Ancestry.com?

I didn't always go to the supermarket. Sometimes I sat in the car and scrolled through my phone. Obviously, I could have done that from bed, but night driving was not supposed to be rational and I clicked on way more random links while I was in an empty, well-lit parking lot. Ninety per cent of Canadians live within a hundred miles of the border, a fact I learned from a page of facts that you might not know about Canadians. The first time I typed the word "naturalization" in a text, my phone autocorrected it to "neutralization."

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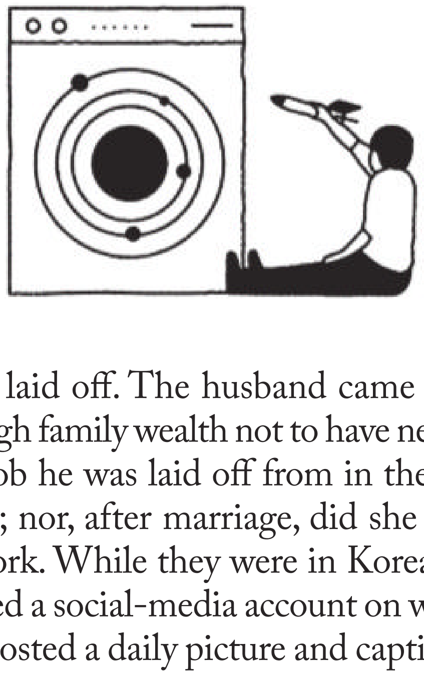
A good friend of mine had been planning her wedding, then the pandemic happened, and it was postponed, postponed, postponed. Finally, she cancelled the thing altogether and went to city hall. The money she saved by not paying for half a wedding (deposits were lost) she put toward a honeymoon of indefinite length. She and her husband would go to Korea and Japan, across Southeast Asia, through Morocco and the nice parts of Europe, and then down to Patagonia. Korea for her relatives, who would not have flown out for her wedding anyway. Japan for his. To reduce her other commitments, she, like my sister-in-law, left her job, and he had already been laid off. The husband came from enough family wealth not to have needed the job he was laid off from in the first place; nor, after marriage, did she need to work. While they were in Korea, she started a social-media account on which she posted a daily picture and captioned it with an itemized list of how much they'd spent that day on food, housing, and transportation. The goal was to stay frugal. On the one hand, it made sense, but, on the other, why?



While I was at my job that I couldn't quit, a photograph arrived in my in-box from my father. I saw two people of my parents' height and build, bundled in several layers of coats, with dark sunglasses and full-face wraps, holding a sign indicating that they'd arrived in Antarctica. There was no way to confirm that these were my parents. I could not even tell if the individuals were Asian. A day later, he sent me another e-mail, a photo of two certificates they'd received from the ship's captain, printed with their full Chinese names, confirming that they had transited the Antarctic Peninsula, going all the way to a latitude of 64 degrees 58 minutes south. My father liked, as I did, tangible and quantifiable markers of success. As our lawyer kept saying, for my application to succeed, my marriage had to be "bona fide." We heard that phrase on loop, sometimes twice in one billable minute. From the Latin, meaning "in good faith," genuine, and not counterfeit. I imagined the ancients waving bits of gold at one another and saying, This is a bona-fide Roman coin. Now give me in return a bona-fide donkey.

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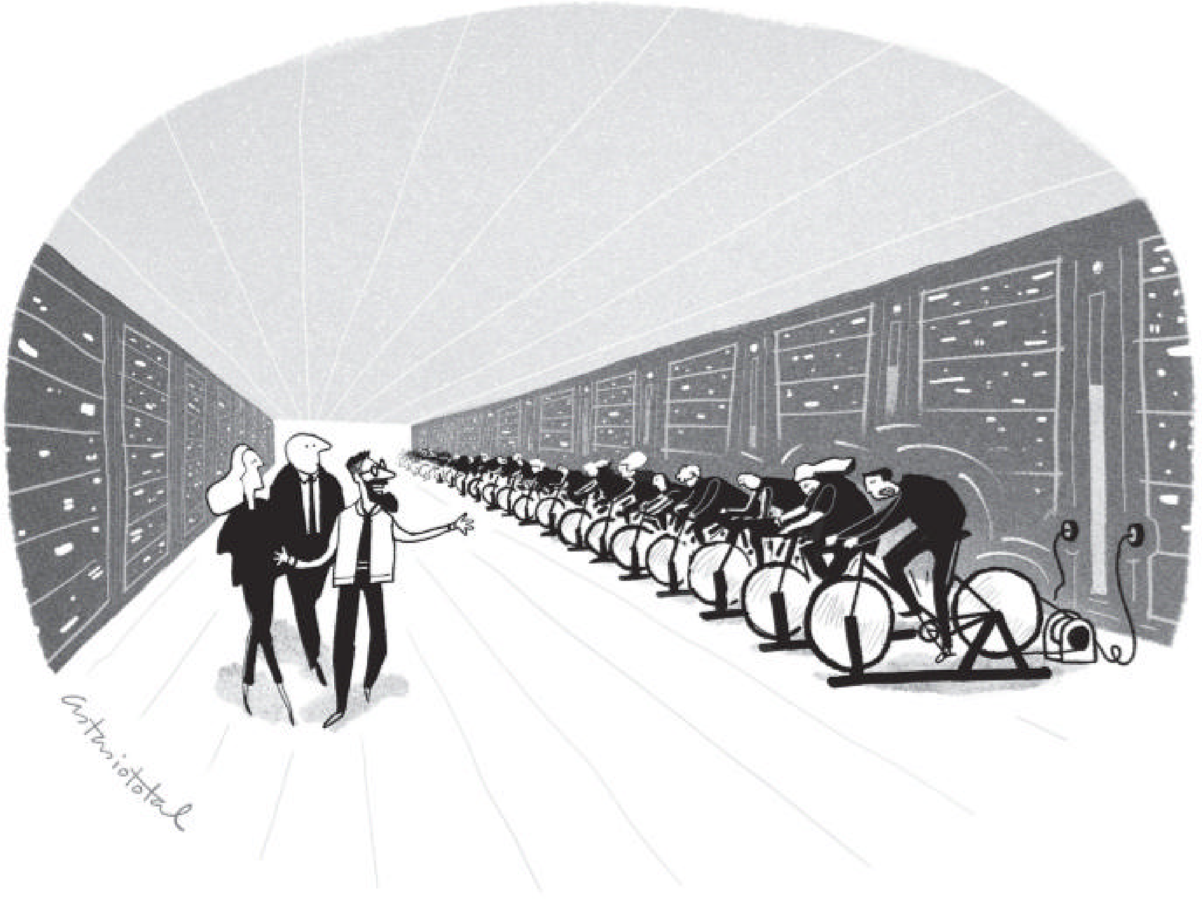
One Sunday morning, while we were having breakfast, Matt's sister video-called us and asked what we were doing. Before we had a chance to answer, she started to cry. She was outside on a roof deck, sipping, midday, a glass of Madeira. The sky looked beautiful, but we couldn't comment on it—we had to jump right in. Trouble with her host family. Trouble with the school. The family had set a curfew, which she had already broken twice. The third time she would have to go. The school had led her to believe that she would be more like a tutor, paired with small groups. Some days, thirty kids showed up to her classroom, and each child wanted to be read to, but no two could agree on the same book. When parents complained at pickup, she couldn't follow any of their Spanish. On top of that, her best guy friend from college was meant to visit this weekend, but had cancelled at the last minute after having contracted the virus. Matt listened patiently, not pressing her about the curfew or the guy friend. I was about to say that the fastest way to learn a language is to be put in impossible situations where you are yelled at and you can't yell back. Trust me, I've been there, and, trust me, you will survive. But seeing my sister-in-law cry on a roof deck made any teachable moment seem cruel. Why tell someone to just survive when she wants to thrive?

She's having a bad time, my mother-in-law said on FaceTime a few days later, from the airport, at the gate for a flight to Spain. A very bad time and she's all alone. She's just a child. But that doesn't mean you drop everything and go to her, Matt said. Absolutely it does, she said. Children are children. His mother worried about us, too, and asked Matt, not infrequently, What if the green card doesn't go through, what if the green card doesn't go through, what if the green card doesn't go through? The lawyer offered no guarantee, but believed that my case would not fail (unless I lost my employer or husband or committed a felony or developed one of those communicable diseases or travelled out of the country or showed up drunk to the interview or gave answers that un-bona-fided us or made me seem unpatriotic).



"Our latest technological leap allowed us to automate our full operation, become carbon-neutral, and keep all our employees."

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From Patagonia, my friend posted reel after reel of her and her husband spinning three hundred and sixty degrees in lush valleys surrounded by snowcapped peaks. The wind here is constant, she wrote in her caption, allowing for a steady flow of hashtag puns about how the most beautiful place in the world was blowing them away.

You have FOMO, my husband said.

It's a twenty-mile hike to get there, I said. Not to mention the flight down, the ferry, the bus to the campsite. In truth, I never really liked the logistics of travel. Jet lag often turned into insomnia. I puked in moving vehicles without warning. Once, on a wine tour in Tuscany, I took off my own sock to puke into. (The van didn't have bags.) That sock I had to leave in the Tuscan countryside, by a gravel road. As I was puking into it, I thought of my mother and an event that I had no memory of but that she knew had happened because she was there. On the plane from China to Canada—our one-way tickets paid for by my grandparents, so that my mother and I could reunite with my father in Ontario and start our fun, immigrant lives—on this thirteen-hour flight, I drank an entire can of Sprite. I'd never been on a plane. I'd never been given an entire can of Sprite. I was small enough that when I stood on my seat my head barely cleared the headrest. The person in the row behind waved to the top of my bowl cut. Then, my mother said, I stood on tiptoe and projectile vomited, at this person, the entire contents of the can. Was that act my secret rebellion against leaving China? Was it my body knowing that I would not see my grandparents and cousins again for at least five years? Was my projectile vomit FOMO?

That's not what people mean by FOMO, my husband said.

Fear of missing out on what you have left behind. FOMOOWYHLB, I said.

My husband remained silent.

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My friend and her husband travelled to Santiago, and, in a new post, she was eating with a happy Asian couple who turned out to be my mom and dad. I texted my mother about their whereabouts and she confirmed that they were, indeed, in Chile, exploring the art. Art? I texted back. News to me that my mother cared about art. Yes, we LOVE art, she replied. She and my father had bumped into my friend and her husband at a food court, to which, after visiting art museums that morning, they'd all gone with the same idea—of getting a cheap meal from the equivalent of a Panda Express. My parents paid for the meal, which was why my friend wrote in her caption, So serendipitous meeting the parents of a friend! $0 for lunch. YOLO.

What were the chances? I said to my husband.

Matt looked at the photo of my friend, her husband, and my parents. He said, Everyone there probably thinks the four of them are a family. The institution of family meant a lot to Matt—to look like a family, to have the same paperwork and last name, though I hadn't changed my name and he and I did not look like a family. We don't all have to match, I used to tell him. We're not a suit of cards. But I also understood his desire for congruity. At border control, officers inspecting our passports asked him no questions and asked me the most obvious ones. Like, what my country of citizenship was and where I was born. These two answers never matched and it seemed that the point of their questions was to remind me of that fact.

Here was another reason I loved my husband. He had a very idealized sense of justice. Once, before we boarded a plane to the other London, a gate attendant called me to the desk, where she checked my ticket and passport, which had already been checked by T.S.A. Then I was escorted to stand in a line just outside the gate, alongside other women, some with children, some without, but all of a darker skin tone than those who were being allowed to board. A second gate attendant checked my passport and, after holding the picture up to my face, let me go. My husband had long been cleared to board but stood, fuming, at the desk, where the first attendant assured him that passport checks were random and he replied, Oh, really? I'm fine, I told him on the bridge, where he shouldered my carry-on, so that he was now holding three bags, and pulling a rollaboard, and I was carrying nothing.

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Not far from the supermarket was a twenty-four-hour gas station with ten lanes. I opened my window a sliver and asked for the tank to be filled, then the windshield cleaned. Not far from the twenty-four-hour gas station were a school, a park, and a twenty-four-hour cemetery. As I looped around the cemetery, I thought about death and rebirth. Immigration is both of these things, and there was a period in middle school when all my mother and I did on weekends was go to the mall and sit at the food court, a plate of stir-fried noodles between us. She didn't care about art then. We had no money for cruises or things we didn't need. The eating of those noodles was either death by salt or dismay at what the West had done to Chinese food. I really hate it here, my mother would tell me. I wish I could leave. The implication being that my existence prevented her from leaving, which prevented her from being happy, and, had I not been physically in front of her, she might have just given up on the process and left me, the mall, and the country, without being reborn.

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By default, zombies have insomnia. Inzombia. To be undead, you first have to die and then claw yourself out of your own grave. A pale hand sprouts from the dirt like a spring daffodil. I be alive! this zombie shouts. Then she wanders around in confusion for years: Can someone help me with a problem? Can someone please tell me if I'm dead or alive?

For a week, I slept and felt like a real person, as opposed to, say, a zombie. During this great week of clarity, I told myself yes, I'm excited to be one degree closer to being American, excited (when three years after I get the green card I can apply for citizenship) to become Chinese-Canadian-American, like one of those people with multiple last names. Clarity led to productivity, and, during this great week of productivity, I compiled marriage-interview tips and sample questions. Tip: Do not give vague or inconsistent answers. Question: What color is your current bedroom duvet? Tip: But no need to avoid talking about difficulties you've had as a couple. Question: How many duvet covers do you have and who buys them? When we practiced, Matt guessed two and I said six—because I'd bought them—and, staring at me, he exclaimed, Six? Further details, should the U.S. government be interested: The six duvet covers are of different textiles and this alien is unable to sleep under any of them. Aliens can experience identity fractures or short circuits of the brain. Eventually, new bone grows over these fractures, healthy cells wrapping existential ones. Zombies are not bona-fide people, but they're closer to being people than aliens, so.

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The next time Matt's sister video-called us, she was on a different roof deck. She looked happy, tanned. She had done something new with her hair. Surprise, she said, and panned the phone to my mother-in-law, who we knew was there, and my father-in-law, who we did not. Matt turned his phone to face himself completely. Dad, what the fuck are you doing there? he said. Matt and his father had the usual bond: baseball, barbecues, inside jokes. Dad would have told me if he was going to Spain, Matt must have thought, and what did it mean that he hadn't? Hey, son, his father said, and took Matt's sister's phone and put it to his ear. For a few seconds, until Matt's sister convinced him that he could hold the screen at arm's length and talk directly at it, we saw only the dark inside of my father-in-law's auditory canal. Just here for the weekend, his father said, holding the phone exactly at arm's length. Didn't want to make a fuss in case you guys felt left out. My mother-in-law could be heard saying her husband's name sternly. My father-in-law looked offscreen and said, What? Soon, sister, mother, and father all had to go. A sunset dinner-dance-party river cruise. And more Madeira.

Later, I asked Matt if he wanted to talk about it and he said what was there to talk about, our two families abroad, having fun without us, what was the big deal about that? He busied himself with e-mails, one in particular, politely worded but long, asking our lawyer when we could expect to have news—not that we didn't understand the process or were trying to rush it, not that we wished to piss off the U.S. government or her. Both she and the government had important jobs. Freedom, etc. Waiting for a green card was a First World problem, and while the mention of First World problems has never made a person living in the First World feel better, we were grateful to have these problems over others. Thanks so much for the opportunity.

Beyond manifest anxiety, it was unclear what the e-mail was actually about. He got a reply immediately: an out-of-office message informing us that the lawyer was on holiday.

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When my inzombia came back, I drove to the usual places. For three nights straight, I had my full tank topped off. The fourth night, I wondered what lay beyond the cemetery, so I drove a little farther. Beyond the cemetery was another supermarket, another Wawa, another highway that took me to another gas station. Then suburbs, churches, schools, more cemeteries. As I drove, I wondered how many iterations of American towns I'd have to pass through to get to the Canadian border. North was the border. East was the ocean. For each minute I drove, I asked myself what would happen if I drove for another minute. It's only another minute, I thought, and when was the last time I'd gone to the border? What did a border look like these days? And supermarket or cemetery: with which would this country end? ♦

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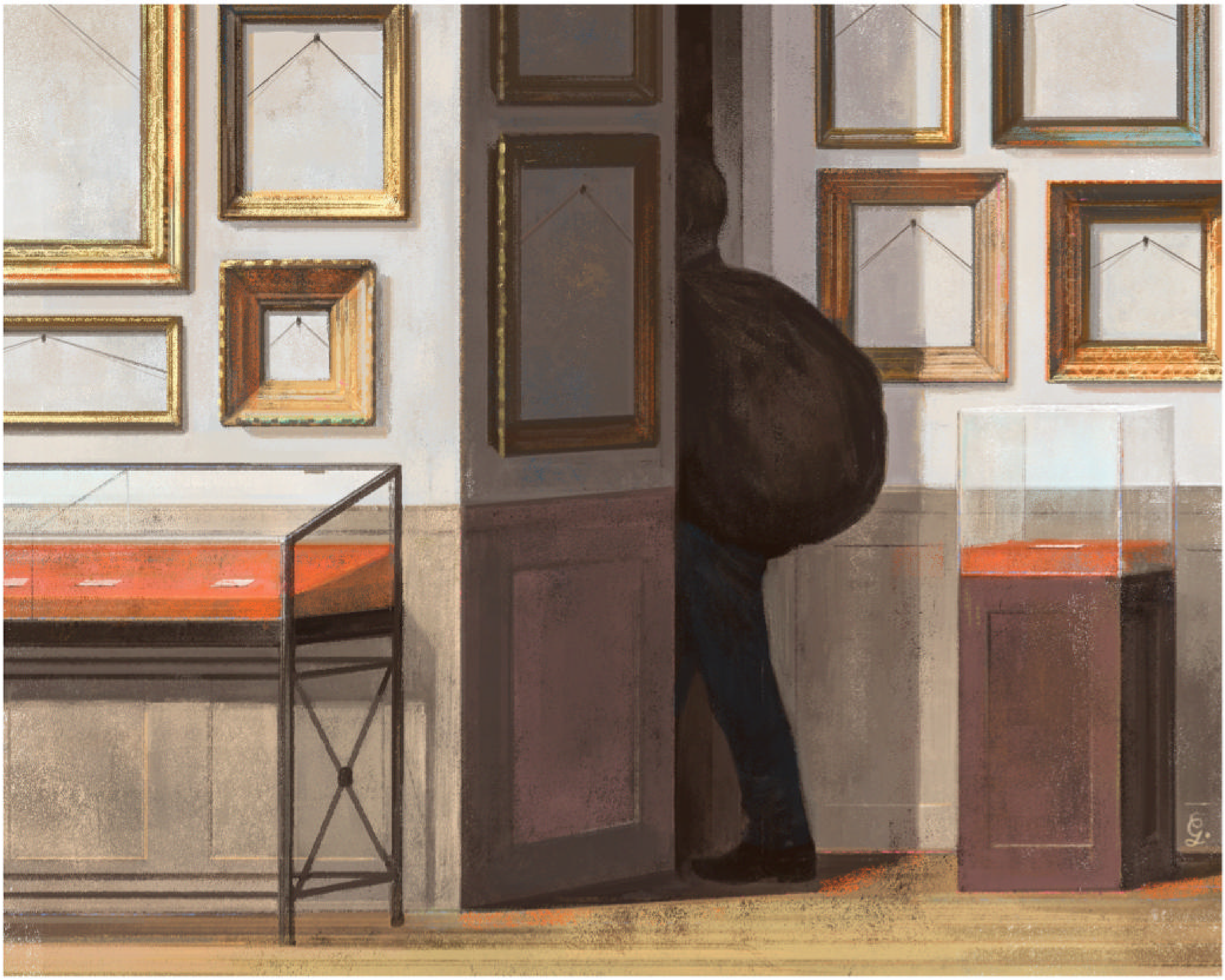
Weike Wang on citizenship and belonging.

THE CRITICS



BOOKS

NOW YOU SEE IT

The curious allure of the heist.

BY KATHRYN SCHULZ

The first thing Stéphane Breitwieser steals from Belgium's Art & History Museum is an index card. Folded in half and set inside a partially empty display case, it reads, in French, "Objects Removed for Study." The museum contains one of the largest collections of art and antiquities in Europe, but Breitwieser immediately recognizes that, for his purposes, its most valuable item is the notecard. He jimmies open the case, pockets the card, and, together with his girlfriend and accomplice, Anne-Catherine Kleinklaus, strolls onward. To anyone who happens to notice them, they look like a happy, art-loving young couple enjoying a date at a museum, which, in a sense, they are.

A few rooms later, another display case catches Breitwieser's eye. This one is filled with fantastically ornate sixteenth-century silver objects, including goblets, chalices, and a miniature warship. The lock, he notices, is high end but poorly installed; he smacks the top and the cylinder drops out of its housing and into the display case. Breitwieser helps himself to two

Michael Finkel's "The Art Thief" recounts the exploits of a Frenchman who stole two billion dollars' worth of art.

ILLUSTRATION BY GÉRARD DUBOIS

chalices and a tankard, then sets the index card down where they used to be. Only when he and Kleinklaus have reached his car does he realize that he has left the lid of the tankard behind. That won't do. He is an aesthetic perfectionist; a topless tankard will be a torment to him. Kleinklaus knows this about her boyfriend and, although he is usually the improvisational genius, she can hold her own when circumstances require it. She takes out one of her earrings and returns to the entrance, Breitwieser in tow. When she shows the guard her remaining earring and says she thinks she knows where she lost the other one, he lets them both back inside. At the display case, Breitwieser takes the tankard lid, along with—why not?—two additional goblets.

They return two weeks later. The index card is still in the case. So is the warship, which Breitwieser puts in Kleinklaus's purse. Then, from the same display, he nicks a two-foot-tall chalice, which he stuffs up the sleeve of his coat, making it impossible to bend his left arm. The pair are on their way to the exit when a guard asks to see their tickets. Kleinklaus's is at the bottom of her purse, beneath the ship. Breitwieser's is in his left pocket, which he can't access with his left hand. He reaches across his body, like a man drawing a sword, fishes out the ticket, hands it to the guard, and explains that they're just headed to the museum café to grab a bite to eat. The guard waves them on, and they go to the café, sit down with their ill-gotten goods, and have lunch.

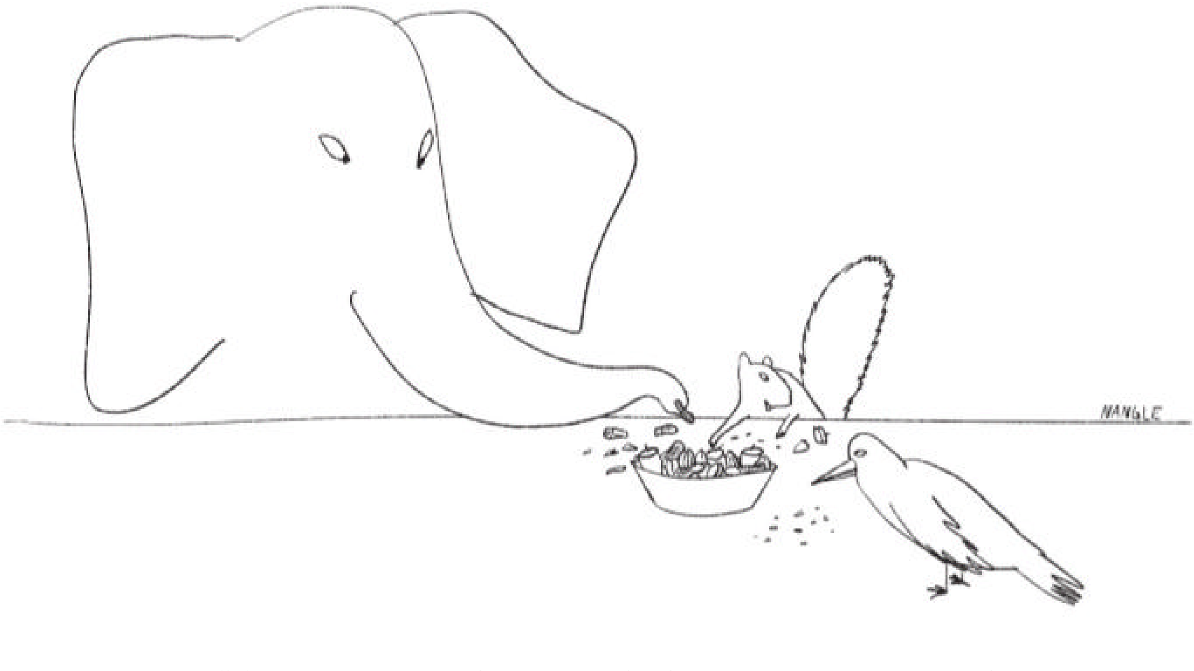
Two days later, they come back for more, bringing the total number of artifacts they have stolen from that single display to eleven. Aside from the "Objects Removed for Study" card, the case is now almost empty. On their way out of town, they stop at an antique shop whose front window boasts a beautiful seventeenth-century silver-and-gold urn. Later, back home, Kleinklaus phones the shop and asks how much the urn costs. Around a hundred thousand dollars, the owner tells her, but it's worth it. "Madame," he says, "you really must see it." But of course, by then, the urn is no longer in his window. It is in a modest house in an industrial town in eastern France, in the attic rooms occupied by Breitwieser, Kleinklaus, and some two billion dollars' worth of stolen art.

All this is recounted, thrillingly, in "The Art Thief" (Knopf), by the journalist Michael Finkel. It is his third book, and also the third one to search for meaning—moral, aesthetic, existential—in criminal acts. This is an interest he comes by honestly, or, more precisely, dishonestly. In 2002, Finkel, who was then a contributing writer at the New York *Times Magazine*, plummeted from grace when the protagonist of an article he wrote, about allegations of child slavery on West African cocoa plantations, turned out to be a composite character. The *Times* fired him and soon afterward published a lengthy correction, which took his transgressions from private to public and took a sledgehammer to his reputation.

An hour and a half before that correction ran, Finkel got a phone call from a fellow-reporter. To his surprise, confusion, relief, and horror, the man was not calling about his journalistic offenses; he was calling to ask if Finkel was aware that someone named Christian Longo, who was accused of and would later confess to murdering his wife and three young children in Oregon, had recently been captured in Mexico, where he had adopted the identity of a writer he admired—Michael Finkel of the *Times Magazine*. Real and faux Finkel began to correspond, and both men's misdeeds became fodder for the writer's first book, "True Story: Murder, Memoir, Mea Culpa." A dozen years later, Finkel published "The Stranger in the Woods," an account of a man named Christopher Knight, who, for twenty-seven years, lived in the forests of central Maine entirely outdoors and alone, getting by on the haul from a decades-long burglary streak that kept him in both necessities and luxuries: food, clothing, batteries, propane tanks, sleeping bags, mattresses, books, television sets, handheld games.

Now comes "The Art Thief," which documents a different kind of crime, one that circumvents both the moral horror of murder and the mundanity of petty theft. From 1994 to 2001, Breitwieser, working mostly with Kleinklaus but sometimes alone, stole at a pace unprecedented in the history of art: roughly three out of four weekends per year for eight years, resulting in some three hundred purloined works of art. He plied his craft during business hours, in museums and galleries and auction houses, with tourists and docents and security guards milling around. He never wore a mask and rarely disguised himself at all. He carried no weapons, never hurt anyone, and never threatened to hold anyone hostage. He did not use the art he stole to fund other illegal activities or sustain an extravagant life style. He simply took it home to those attic rooms and admired it.

As illegal activities go, the crime spree of Stéphane Breitwieser was decorous, electrifying, and, for all its outrageousness, familiar. As a form of entertainment, "The Art Thief" has less in common with Finkel's earlier books than with movies such as "Ocean's Eleven." Like that film, it unmistakably belongs to the genre of the heist, a category of entertainment so fun and frictionless that it is easy to skate right past the obvious



"And to think, if it weren't for this little bowl of mixed nuts, none of us would have met."

question it raises. Why, given our overall disapproval of theft, are stories about heists so appealing—to so many of us, and specifically to Michael Finkel?

A heist, to be clear, is not a legal category. If you are caught with a Rembrandt in your raincoat on the way out of the Louvre, you will not be charged with attempted heist. The term is pure slang, coined in America in the nineteen-twenties, a high-water decade for crimes of all kinds. It likely comes from "hoist," either in the sense of hoisting someone up to shimmy through a window or in that other sense of picking something up, the one implied by "shoplifting." But no one has ever described the pilfering of a can of Red Bull and a pack of condoms as a heist; indeed, real-life crimes are only infrequently characterized that way. For the most part, "heist" suggests less a specific illegal action than the form of entertainment that depicts it.

Although the heist genre shares a border with mystery novels, spy novels, true crime, and crime fiction, it has its own distinctive conventions, the first of which is that the object of the theft must be spectacularly valuable. Steal thirty thousand dollars or a Rolex watch and it's a crime; steal thirty million dollars or the Hope Diamond and it's a heist. Second, that object must be taken from an institution of significant standing. Heists do not occur at Sunoco stations or suburban homes; they happen in banks, preferably on Wall Street, or museums, preferably the Met. Third, the theft must be borderline impossible. That's why every heist plot pauses at some point to explain why, for instance, the thieves have to rob not one casino but three at the same time (as in Steven Soderbergh's 2001 remake of the aforementioned "Ocean's Eleven," among the most genre-satisfying of all heist films), or why they have to steal not one car but fifty in less than three days (as in the 2000 remake of "Gone in 60 Seconds," which features Nicolas Cage and Angelina Jolie in what you might call a car-studded cast: among others, an Aston Martin, a Ferrari Testarossa, a Lamborghini Diablo, a Bentley Arnage, and a 1967 Ford Mustang Shelby GT500). Give or take some paraphrasing, in almost every heist story someone says, "It can't be done."

But it can, of course; you just need the right criminals. That's the fourth convention of the heist: assembling a team. Its members are typically underworld all-stars, each one the master of a highly specialized skill: picking pockets, counting cards, hacking computers, back-flipping over motion detectors, strolling into Sotheby's with so much savoir faire as to seem like a legitimate customer. Collectively, they illustrate the point, made by, of all people, Aristotle, that just as there are outstanding doctors and musicians there are also "perfect thieves," who "have no deficiency in respect of the form of their peculiar excellence." According to a fifth convention, however, when we first encounter these perfect thieves they are wasting their talents on petty chicanery or attempts at moral rectitude; a sixth convention is that at least one of them has retired and must be dragged back into a life of crime for one last irresistible gig. (In a nice meta move, Soderbergh came out of retirement to direct "Logan Lucky"—essentially an Appalachian "Ocean's Eleven," in which the West Virginian protagonists set out to rob a Nascar speedway.)

Perhaps the most crucial convention of the heist story, however, is that, despite possessing so many illicit aptitudes, the thieves must barely seem like criminals. Often, they reassure us that they steal for pleasure rather than for profit, delighting either in the work itself or in the specific item they are stealing. ("I didn't do it for the money," Cage's character declares in "Gone in 60 Seconds." "I did it for the cars.") When the thieves *are* motivated by profit, their victims are presented as so wealthy and corrupt that they deserve to be robbed. Per the logic of Robin Hood, it's appropriate to steal from the rich as long as you redistribute the bounty to the poor; per the logic of the heist, it's appropriate to steal from the rich because they are rich. The implication—a comfortable one in today's one-per-cent world—is that anyone affluent enough to own so much desirable stuff didn't come by it honestly, either.

In short, in a heist story the bad guys are basically the good guys. At worst, they are cheerfully and debonairly amoral (as in "Ocean's Eight," the all-female entry in the franchise, whose plot involves an ethically indefensible but nonetheless enjoyable theft at the Met Gala of a whole lot of bling); at best, they are righting some grievous wrong (as in "Inside Man," where the target of the heist is a Nazi collaborator). Much of the time, though, they are either robbing other criminals (as in "The Italian Job"), for whom one can have only so much sympathy, or simply getting their due (as in "Logan Lucky," where the heisters retain just enough of their haul to leave behind their hardscrabble lives). In keeping with this ethic of ethicalness, many heists are bloodless, or largely so; if they deal out violence or death at all, it is only to the truly wicked.

Not all of these conventions appear in every heist story, of course, but taken together they define an identifiable category while allowing for endless riffing. Wes Anderson's 2009 animated film "Fantastic Mr. Fox" is a heist narrative, as is the 2008 documentary "Man on Wire," about Philippe Petit's illegal tightrope walk between the Twin Towers—a planning-filled, panache-filled, victimless crime at a major institution. Heists of all kinds also appear in books of all kinds: in fiction that ranges from the potboilerish (Gerald A. Browne's "11 Harrowhouse") to the ambitious (Colson Whitehead's "Harlem Shuffle"), and in nonfiction that details the theft of valuable goods from the obvious to the absurd: gold, diamonds, pearls, cash, rare books, rare maps, rare feathers, rocks from the moon.

Of all the priceless objects in the world, however, perhaps none lend themselves so well to the heist narrative as works of art. That's not just because art is expensive, housed in grand institutions, and difficult to steal. It is also because anyone motivated to steal art—for art's sake, as the convention dictates—seems intrinsically refined, the kind of genteel thief whose moral lapses are overshadowed by excellent taste. This idealized criminal reached its fictional apotheosis in the 1999 version of "The Thomas Crown Affair" (another remake, like many good heist movies), which stars Pierce Brosnan as an art thief so charming and cultivated that the insurance investigator tasked with trying to catch him falls in love with him instead. But, as the actual people responsible for catching art thieves understand, Thomas Crown is not merely fictional but also fantastical. A thief like him—daring and skilled, but also motivated by aesthetics and deeply knowledgeable about art—is a figment of our collective imagination: so virtually every police officer, detective, and museum-security expert would have told you, until Stéphane Breitwieser came along.

How does such a highly improbable person come to exist? The backstory, Finkel tells us, is this: Breitwieser was a troubled and solitary young man who, via the divorce of his parents, fell from the upper classes—a life of boating on Lake Geneva and skiing in the Alps—to a considerably lower rung of society. For him, the symbol of that fall and its essential injustice was that he went from enjoying a home filled with high art and antique weaponry to living with his mother in an apartment decorated with cheap movie posters and, horror of horrors, IKEA furniture. After graduating from high school, he flitted from job to job, beginning with a brief stint as a museum guard, the last day of which he celebrated by stealing a fifteen-hundred-year-old Merovingian belt buckle. Eventually, he met and fell in love with Anne-Catherine Kleinklaus, a nurse's aide with good taste and a calm demeanor, who later moved in with him in the attic rooms of his mother's new home—small, but an upgrade from the apartment. The couple enjoyed visiting museums together, and one day, at a little one in an Alsatian village, they admired a flintlock pistol whose chief virtue, from Breitwieser's perspective, was that it was nicer than any his father owned. She urged him to take the pistol and he did; they got away with it, and got a taste for it.

Unlike most art thieves but very much like a classic heist hero, Breitwieser steals art because he loves it. He spends his free time reading histories of art, biographies of artists, and catalogues raisonnés, and he tells Finkel that beautiful objects should be liberated from the "prison" of museums so that they can be experienced appropriately: at length, up close, in the privacy of his bedroom. Almost any of the works he steals could net him a small fortune, and plenty of them—a Brueghel, a Watteau, a Lucas Cranach the Elder—are worth a large one, yet he refuses to sell any. Instead, he lives off his mother's patience, his girlfriend's meagre salary, and intermittent low-wage jobs, leaving him so short on money that, Finkel writes, "even on getaway drives he avoids paying highway tolls." But then, Breitwieser isn't big on getaway drives in the first place; like the classic heist hero, he disapproves of haste, violence, and drama of all kinds. The best theft, to his mind, is not so much stylish as invisible.

In one crucial respect, however, Breitwieser is nothing like Thomas Crown. Most heist narratives feature plans so elaborate that they constitute much of the plot, but Breitwieser generally undertakes his thefts with no real forethought. He simply spots something he likes in a museum or, sometimes, in a museum brochure or an auction catalogue; either way, only once he is standing in front of the object of his desire does he devise a strategy for stealing it. Part of what makes Finkel's book so much fun is that, without exception, those strategies are insane. To be specific, some are insanely risky: when Breitwieser realizes that a crossbow he covets is hanging by a wire from the ceiling, too high to reach, he drags a chair the length of the weapons hall, climbs on top, and unhitches the bow from the wire. Others are insanely simple: when a security camera turns out to be aimed at the work he wants to steal, he just keeps his back to the lens throughout the theft. Others are insanely spontaneous: when he and Kleinklaus are attending the European Fine Art Fair, a venue full of both undercover and uniformed security, a more foolhardy thief attempts to steal something and is promptly apprehended. Without any premeditation, Breitwieser takes advantage of the moment—the melee, the rubbernecking, the guards all flocking to the scene—to nick an extremely valuable Renaissance painting.

How does he pull off such thefts again and again? With shocking minimalism. There is no rappelling from roofs, no triggering of fire alarms, no high-tech devices to shut down security systems. His gear consists chiefly of a Swiss Army knife and, weather permitting, an overcoat. Kleinklaus stands lookout, giving him a nod when all is clear and coughing when trouble is coming. He uses the knife to slice open the silicone seal on display cases, unscrew art work from its base (in one instance, extracting thirty screws in a single visit, one patient turn at a time), and pry off the nails holding paintings in their frames—never to cut the canvas itself, an act he regards with abhorrence. Then, with precise timing, fleetness of motion, and the courage of his convictions, he picks up the object, stashes it in Kleinklaus's bag or on his person, and unhurriedly makes his way to the exit.

As all this suggests, you learn a lot from "The Art Thief" about the limitations of museum security. One is built into the nature of the institution: unlike banks, museums must keep their valuables where the public can see them. Moreover, they must minimize the barriers between the viewer and the work. It would be difficult to steal a painting that had iron bars in front of it, like the windows of a ground-floor Manhattan apartment, but it would also be difficult to enjoy it. Another problem is that security systems are expensive, and most museums, especially smaller local ones, are reluctant to allocate money to upgrade them. As a result, many museums have far fewer effective safeguards than you might imagine.

For these reasons, museum security relies heavily on the intuition and attentiveness of employees, who, like all of us, can be distracted, beguiled, or bamboozled. In one episode, when Breitwieser and Kleinklaus decide to take a brief break from stealing, they join a museum tour, which they would ordinarily never do, since it means that at least one staff member could identify them. Midway through, Breitwieser has a revelation: "Something that a thief would obviously never do is *precisely* what a thief should consider doing." He pulls off a theft mid-tour, then does it again and again during other tours in other places. Generalizing from the same principle, he and Kleinklaus start exchanging pleasantries with guards, asking them directions, and waving goodbye when they leave with millions of dollars' worth of art tucked into their bags and clothing. Even more brashly, Breitwieser likewise plays against type when dealing with law enforcement. After one theft, when he discovers that someone has keyed his car, he himself phones the police, who inspect the vehicle while stolen art sits in its trunk. On another occasion, he leaves a museum to find a cop in the process of issuing him a parking ticket—cheap as ever, he hadn't fed the meter—and protests vociferously while carrying six square feet of plundered altarpiece panels in his jacket.

Perhaps the most shocking thing about Breitwieser's methods, however, is not their simplicity or their brazenness but their efficacy. "In the three hundred years that public museums have existed," Finkel tells us, "very few individuals or gangs have pulled off a dozen or more heists." Breitwieser pulls one off every dozen days. He has been known to steal twice in a single weekend, and to steal from three different museums in the same day. When a French art detective finally notices a pattern and compiles a list of fourteen separate incidents he thinks could be related, he concludes that, if a lone outfit is responsible for even half of them, it is "astoundingly active." A Swiss inspector who also picks up the trail suspects that a single thief might have stolen between ten and twenty paintings from European museums. At the time, sixty-nine such paintings are adorning Breitwieser's attic walls.

This ultra-lucrative, odds-defying crime streak is wonderfully narrated by Finkel, in a tale whose trajectory is less rise and fall than crazy and crazier. Only briefly does his book lag, in its discussions of the alleged science of our attraction to art, which, in addition to partaking uncritically of the mania for explaining all of human experience by waving in the general direction of evolution and MRIs, is top to bottom wrong. Darwin's theory of natural selection does not state that our species survives "only by eliminating inefficiency and waste," art does not exist "because we've won the evolutionary war," and beauty is not "in the medial orbital-frontal cortex of the beholder." Even when the science is plausible, it flattens rather than sharpens Finkel's tale. Maybe there really are neurochemical imbalances "capable of creating an unstoppable and sometimes criminal collector." But more likely, such an imbalance is one of many factors implicated in obsessive collecting, or cannot be clearly established as a cause rather than as a corollary or an effect of underlying issues; in any case, it is hardly a satisfying explanation for a figure as fascinating as Breitwieser. Of the who, what, when, where, and why of crime, it

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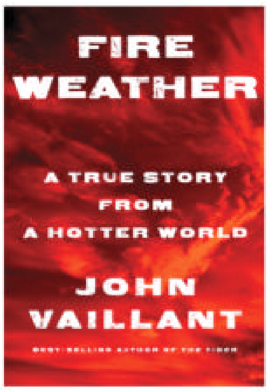
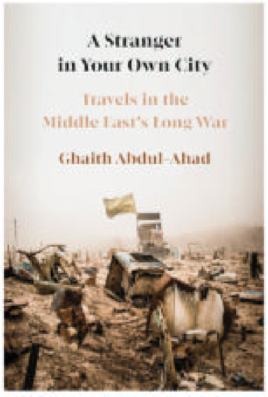
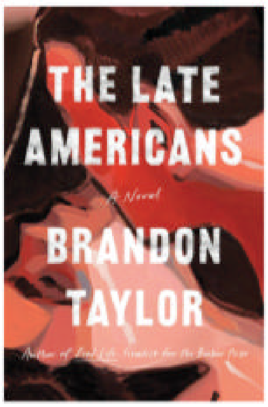

FIRE WEATHER
A TRUE STORY FROM A HOTTER WORLD
JOHN VAILLANT
BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF THE TIGER

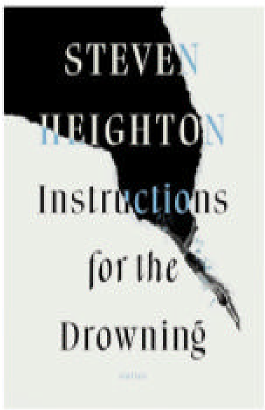
Fire Weather, *by John Vaillant (Knopf)*. In 2016, a wildfire ripped through the oil town of Fort McMurray, in Alberta, hot enough to vaporize toilets and bend a street light in half. It was the most expensive disaster in Canada's history. This alarming account tracks the destruction, the role of fire in industry in the past hundred and fifty years, and the disregarded alarms about the environment raised by scientists, dating as far back as the eighteen-fifties. "Climate science came of age in tandem with the oil and automotive industries," Vaillant writes, and their futures are as linked as their pasts. The number of places facing fates similar to Fort McMurray's is rapidly increasing, even as "our reckoning with industrial CO_2" moves painfully slowly.


A Stranger in Your Own City
Travels in the Middle East's Long War
Ghaith Abdul-Ahad

A Stranger in Your Own City, *by Ghaith Abdul-Ahad (Knopf)*. The author, an Iraqi journalist, narrates the American invasion of his country and its aftermath by recounting the lives of a cross-section of Iraqi society, including a Shia man who swaps houses with a Sunni family as sectarianism fractures neighborhoods; a woman doctor working under the Islamic State in Mosul; and a fixer who extorts families whose sons have been detained by security forces, promising to lessen their torture for a fee. Abdul-Ahad is equally caustic about Saddam Hussein, the American occupiers, corrupt Iraqi politicians, and opportunistic religious commanders ("freelance criminal gangsters running their own death squads"). His kaleidoscopic view emphasizes aspects of ordinary Iraqi lives which are lost in the simplistic interpretations of outsiders.



The Late Americans, *by Brandon Taylor (Riverhead)*. This novel follows a group of people in Iowa City, many of them M.F.A. students, and explores the ways that dissonant conditions of class, race, and social circumstances can compromise our freedom to pursue art and our ability to fully understand those we love. Amid financial concerns, artistic frustrations, and the judgments, jealousies, and posturing of their classmates, the characters find solace in moments of shared tenderness that transcend the ever-present threat of alienation. In a workshop, one student suggests that another's poem may "bend our sympathies," and Taylor's novel does something similar: his characters reveal selfish or even violent tendencies, but his multifaceted portrayals show each of them to be as innocent and as flawed as any human.



Instructions for the Drowning, *by Steven Heighton (Biblioasis)*. These stories, by a Canadian novelist, poet, and musician who died last year, peer keenly into the penumbra surrounding death. A student, fervent and pious, accosts the great Harry Houdini. A man bench-presses at the gym; the bar slips and compresses his lungs; he struggles, but no one sees. A plastic surgeon begs his aging wife to allow him to smooth her wrinkles. Each story's frame is precisely sized. Heighton's stories wrestle with life's uncontrollable endings and beginnings: birth, tragedy, failed resurrection. His characters grasp at time, even as it slips away—violent, sacred, apocalyptic, mundane.

is always the last question that is hardest to answer; better to acknowledge the depth of the mystery than wave it away with flimsy science.

But that is just a quibble. Over all, "The Art Thief," like its title character, has confidence, élan, and a great sense of timing. It is propelled by suspense and surprises, and it is neither ashamed of nor stingy with the fundamental emotional payoffs of the heist—the disbelieving *No way!*, the unabashed glee at the deft accomplishment of the seemingly impossible and definitely illegal. Nor does it hesitate, when the time comes, to bring down the boom. In the final chapters of Finkel's book, his dashing young antihero turns old and sad. His relationship with Kleinklaus falls apart (even as she and Breitwieser's mother emerge as perhaps the most fascinating characters in the book, and arguably the most morally compromised). The claim that he takes scrupulous care of his art falls apart. The claim that he never sells anything he steals falls apart. The claim that he is not just a glorified shoplifter falls apart. In short, his whole life falls apart, and the book takes a hard, appropriate turn toward disgust and sorrow. Finkel, who has been to his own rock bottom, is both clear-eyed and compassionate about the downfall, but something more than sympathy lingers in his tone. It is a kind of wistful admiration—a yearning, even at the bitter end, to believe that an art thief is more than just another thief, a heist more than just another crime.

The epigraph to "The Art Thief" is a maxim of Oscar Wilde's: "Aesthetics are higher than ethics." That was an incendiary idea in its time (and for that matter remains a provocation in today's morally anxious literary culture), but what Wilde meant by it is a far cry from what Finkel implies by using it in his book. Wilde believed that, contrary to the claims of sentimentalism and of generations of prudish literary critics, the quality of a work of art does not depend on its ethical purity—that art depicting the degraded, the depraved, or the wicked can still be beautiful. Finkel, by contrast, suggests that aesthetics are higher than ethics not when it comes to assessing artistic merit but in the world at large: that beauty trumps morality no matter the context.

This is an idea he has propounded before. "I hope readers know that this was an attempt to reach higher—to make something beautiful, frankly," he told a reporter at *New York* a week or so after his career came crashing down. The only problem with his *Times* article, he argued, was "the journalistic techniques employed": "Look, I wrote a 6,000-word story without a single quote, without a blink in the shift of tone and pace. It was an ambitious attempt. I slipped. It deserved a correction. But there is a great deal of accuracy. Not once has the prose been called into question." Of course, claiming that there is a great deal of accuracy in a story that also contains a great deal of fabrication is akin to pointing out that some of the house you have set on fire is still standing. But everything else about this defense is repellent, too: the notion that a story about exploited African children could "reach higher" by treating them as interchangeable; the insinuation that, in the face of such allegedly bravura writing, only a philistine would care about facts.

In "True Story," published three years later, Finkel offered a far more thoroughgoing mea culpa, but I have seldom read a book that made me so queasy. From early on, it is evident that Finkel and Longo are engaged in an act of mutual exploitation: the murderer needs an audience to test out different strategies for winning over a jury, while the journalist needs a story that will help restore his devastated career. To get that story, Finkel is by turns manipulative, obsequious, and appallingly cozy, sharing with Longo the details of his love life, putting him on the phone with his girlfriend, and making him the first person to know of his plan to propose to her. Meanwhile, he interrogates his own dishonesty, maintaining that he never committed any other professional indiscretions but admitting that he lied profligately in his personal life—to cover up his serial infidelity, to gain sympathy, to burnish his reputation, or just for the heck of it. He pretended to be Canadian; he claimed he could speak French; most troubling, he curried intimacy with a woman by telling her that he had a brother who had died in infancy. If Finkel emerges from all this soul-baring and murderer-befriending more chastened than before, he also emerges as difficult to like and even harder to admire.

In a way, Finkel's subsequent career makes sense; again and again, he is drawn to stories of men and their transgressions. Still, in some respects, "The Stranger in the Woods" was a surprising next act. It is a nuanced and compassionate book, and Finkel is thoughtful on the moral dilemmas raised by the North Pond hermit, as Christopher Knight was routinely called—above all, on how a just society should respond to the nonviolent crimes of a man so clearly unfit to live within its limits. The questions at the heart of that book prefigure those animating "The Art Thief": To whom do the rules apply? And: How much should we forgive someone for their crimes because their life is exceptional?

Finkel's interest in such questions is self-evident, and "The Art Thief" has the feel of a book whose author has finally found his ideal subject. In the genre of the heist, where elegance really does trump ethics, we are called upon to admire people we should not, and Finkel is gifted at making us do so—presumably because, to him, that kind of admiration comes naturally. The clearest tell comes at the end of "The Art Thief," in the "Note on the Reporting" that details his research and sourcing. That note, which simultaneously serves to acknowledge his past misdeeds and to attempt to quiet any ongoing concerns, includes a story that does not appear elsewhere in the text. He and his subject are driving to the scene of one of Breitwieser's crimes, at the home of the painter Peter Paul Rubens, now a museum, and on the way they stop at a busy rest area. In lieu of paying seventy cents to use the bathroom, Breitwieser ducks under the turnstile so swiftly and gracefully that no one but Finkel notices. Then he turns to the author and gestures at him to follow suit.

Finkel declines. Unsure of his agility, he is embarrassed by the thought of getting caught, both in the middle of the turnstile and in the middle of committing such a silly offense. But those are practical objections, not moral ones. Invited to act without considering the consequences, to flout the rules in plain sight, to join the fellowship of first-class miscreants, Finkel responds in a way as revealing as anything in his many mea culpas: "I wanted to." ♦

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BOOKS

OUT OF PLACE

Megan Fernandes's map of desire.

BY KAMRAN JAVADIZADEH

In "I Do Everything I'm Told," love and compulsion create their own geography.

Where, in a poem, is "here"? Suppose a poem depicts a scene. When you read it, do you feel yourself transported there? Or do you feel in the presence of the poet at her desk, recalling the scene and telling you about it?

For Megan Fernandes, "here" often seems to designate a city. There's New York City, where she lives, but also Mumbai, Los Angeles, Paris, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Nairobi, Guatemala City, Madrid, Lisbon, Palermo, Philadelphia, Miami, Venice, Dar es Salaam, White Plains, Phoenix, Zurich, Vienna, and London: twenty cities named across the forty-nine poems of her third collection, "I Do Everything I'm Told" (Tin House). The book bears the dedication "For the restless." Fernandes, who comes from a Goan family by way of Tanzania, counts herself among them.

And yet the proliferation of these cities imbues them with a sense of unreality; the poems don't so much feel set in the cities as gesture toward them from some other, unspecified place. In one poem, which seems to occur in the aftermath of a breakup, Fernandes writes, "There is no home / and nothing to return to, just a series of shadows, partial signs of presence: a flickering." One would be hard pressed to locate that flickering on a map; its only location seems to be the here and now of lyric enunciation: "I say things and then unsay them. It was love. It was not love. It is raining. It is not raining." In another poem, she addresses a would-be lover with what could well be an address to us: "We put the art between us because the art exists / and we do not."

Why, then, the book's relentless geography? If "we" do not exist, if only "the art" does, why insist on telling us where we are? Poets have long invoked place names as objects of desire—an Ithaca to which one is bound to return, an Eden from which one has been exiled, a Kyoto for which, even in Kyoto, one longs. For Fernandes, though, place is not desire's terminus. Instead, the names of cities allow her to drop pins on a map of desire, to create a spatial record of an erotic life, its traffic, its compulsions. In the poem "Sagittarius," she boards a plane bound for Zurich and promptly falls in love with her seatmate, a stranger to whom, in the poem's final lines, she cannot help submitting: "Come see me in Vienna, you say. And I do. / Because I believe so much in being led." That belief sometimes looks, as Fernandes describes it in the book's title poem, like "kink or worship or both"—like desire that wrenches her out of the course of her life. And sometimes it looks like the annihilation of desire. "I just want," Fernandes writes, "to be dwarfed / by everything / these days."

But a belief in "being led" also leaves behind a trail, and Fernandes studies the map she's made. "One winter," Fernandes tells us, "I became very quiet / and saw my life." She wants to know whether that life coheres as narrative, whether between the points of its global itinerary there exists something like a constellation. Fernandes tests this question in a crown of sonnets that appear in the book's second section. (A crown is a sequence in which the last line of each sonnet is recast as the first line of the next; a final sonnet ends with the initial line of the first, closing the circuit.) Each sonnet in Fernandes's crown addresses a beloved; each is titled for the city in which the love affair in question seems to have transpired.

While their form suggests coherence and closure, these are sonnets of "False Beloveds," as Fernandes puts it in the section's title. "Don't take it personally," she tells the beloved of "Shanghai Sonnet": "I am young and nothing is sacred yet." In a traditional crown (John Donne wrote one about the stages of Christ's life), that line would be repeated at the start of the following sonnet. But "Brooklyn Sonnet," next in the sequence, begins,

ILLUSTRATION BY JUAN BERNABEU

"You are young and nothing is sacred yet." Where the crown offers continuity, Fernandes leaps from one city to the next. "In love, the rules are meant to be broken," "Los Angeles Sonnet" begins. Playing fast and loose with the conventions of a verse form allows for a performance of being unbothered by eros: "In role-play and foreplay, I break character / and make things as unsexy as possible."

But between each sonnet and the next there also appears an erasure of the sonnet we've just read. As words are stripped away, nonchalance also fades, leaving in its wake something hotter and raw. "Paris Sonnet" is addressed to a misogynist:

> That was the era of violence. And it was
> over fast because you knew you were
> an experiment. *I am your goddamn slum*
> *experiment*, you laughed. *Your criminal.*
> No. Just the cruelest person I have loved.

On the facing page, the erasure recasts the poem's final three lines:

> an experiment
> experiment
> No   the   person I   loved

If the original poem maintains clarity and distance from the experience, the erasure betrays the messy swelter of ambivalence that persists. No longer is this man "just the cruelest person I have loved"—now he is also revealed to be, simply, "the person I loved." Both statements have a claim to truth; cities are built upon their ruins.

The geographic mode gives Fernandes a way to spatialize and examine the life lived. But it serves another end, too, in what I consider to be the book's most moving poems. In those, geography paradoxically points to places off the map, not to real life but to potential life, to places that can be inhabited only in the poems.

In such moments, Fernandes remakes our understanding of what it means to be *in* any place at all. Take the title of one particularly uncanny poem, "In Death, We Met in Scotland." Is that first "in" the same as the second? The poem dislocates us just as surely as a charismatic stranger on a plane moved the poet; its human figures have been "distorted / by afterlife"; setting is at once specified and otherworldly. From that vantage, imaginations become porous and a kind of time travel is suddenly possible:

> I touch what I think is your hand
> in the afterlife and recall the story
> of your mom, newly divorced,
> tucking you into bed on New Year's Eve
> in Oregon. Your little brother, too.
> You choked imagining her lonely countdown
> and how you had slept so well
> through her despair.

The genius of a moment like this lies in the way it conjures, beneath the figuration of something like a dream, the "velvet livingness" (the poem's own phrase) of an unwitnessed and therefore speculative past. Its reality may exist "in death," "in Scotland," or "in Oregon," but it is buried beneath layers of sleep, and excavated only within the space of the poem.

Many books of poetry might plausibly be called "I Tell Everything I've Done," and this book in some ways resembles those—there's plenty of confession here. But the collection is less about the conversion of experience into language than it is about the way that language, if one submits to its will, can produce new realities. In the poem "Shanghai," Fernandes feeds and names a stray cat, then feels devastated when the cat disappears: "I had that small burst of fantasy / of our life together, me and her, / a new origin story that keeps repeating. / It says: here, here, here. An eternal present that keeps loss at bay." That repeated "here" doesn't simply designate a place; instead it enacts a wish, one whose call extends the reach of fantasy into the world we inhabit:

> There is a dimension where the cat stays.
> Where I stay, too. There is a version
> where the world goes uncrushed,
> and instead my beloveds multiply,
> and with them, their laughters.
> We all wake to simultaneous dawns
> breaking over Hong Kong and Nairobi,
> Guatemala City and Madrid.
> When one beloved says good morning,
> another says, good morning.
> And for another, maybe it is still night.
> Here it comes again. Night.
> It starts over, but this time
> we have tails and survive.
> We come when called.

The pun is irresistible: this cat, both lost and found—a version of the creature, dead and alive, in Schrödinger's quantum thought experiment—transforms verse into multiverse. Eros calls us into the world, and the world into which we are called is various, simultaneous, here. ♦

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THE THEATRE

LONDON CALLING

"Operation Mincemeat," "Guys and Dolls," and "The Motive and the Cue."

BY HELEN SHAW

David Cumming takes a call in SpitLip's comedy "Operation Mincemeat."

Trying to get a sense of all London theatre in one mad, weeklong dash—you can get to nine shows in seven days if you put your mind to it—is a fool's errand. Casting my mind back, I am left mainly with an impression of people surging noisily in and out of velvet rooms.

My far-and-away favorite production—and a complete surprise to me—was the musical "Operation Mincemeat," at the Fortune Theatre, written by the collective SpitLip: David Cumming, Felix Hagan, Natasha Hodgson, and Zoë Roberts. The title refers to an actual 1943 war maneuver, in which British intelligence disguised a corpse as a downed pilot from the Royal Marines, complete with a briefcase full of phony documents, and set him afloat to wash up on the Spanish coast. Sober-minded accounts of the caper—a book by Ben MacIntyre, a 2021 film—could only gesture to the endeavor's "They did what?" absurdity, but SpitLip has realized that nothing actually separates peak M.I.5 spycraft from amateur theatricals, both historically the province of jolly-oh, old-boys-together Oxbridge types.

SpitLip has been working on its brainchild since 2019, developing it in various smaller theatres before launching it on the West End, but four years of polishing hasn't clouded its sense of freshness and risk. (It helps the heisty mood that the performers onstage seem to feel as though they're getting away with something.) Every night, five actors—drawn from nine—play more than a dozen characters, and you're never entirely sure which configuration you're going to get. (I saw Cumming, Roberts, Christian Andrews, Holly Sumpton, and Claire-Marie Hall.) "Mincemeat" presents itself as pure up-from-the-Fringe wackadoodle merriment, but the show is also a strategic feint. It distracts you with silliness and with lickety-split lyrics in a Lin-Manuel Miranda-esque mode: "It's time for ambition, time to show you've got vision/We're the best brains in Britain, now listen to this!" All the time, though, it's moving its key emotional artillery into line.

The musical concerns itself, at a deep level, with the dead body. Who was he? Intelligence boffins ignore his humanity, in the same way that they brush aside the abilities of their female colleagues and the perils of the submariners who have to sneak their decoy past German U-boats. And so, in two gorgeous numbers, all the manic jollity disappears. First, a quiet secretary (Andrews, an otherworldly tenor) contributes a fake love letter to the pilot's dossier, which, as she sings detail after detail, starts to sound distressingly real. And, later, when the toffs toast one another on a job well done, the submarine crew—played by the same actors—remove their caps for the frozen, anonymous corpse below. "If it's down, it's down together/if it's up, it's up as one," they sing in the cold blue silence, and a comedy that has been cheerfully dismantling jingoism builds a stirring vision of real fellowship in its place.

Oddly enough, "Operation Mincemeat" was the only musical I saw on a conventional proscenium stage. There's a passion for in-the-round performance right now in London: perhaps audiences are eager to come close. (The Playhouse Theatre has even been structurally reconfigured for a new "Cabaret.") The most successful of these stagings is Nicholas Hytner's inventive revival of "Guys and Dolls" (music and lyrics by Frank Loesser, book by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows), at the Bridge, in which some theatregoers sit in tiers, while down on the floor a hundred others are herded this way and that by crew mem-

ILLUSTRATION BY MARCO QUADRI

bers costumed as New York City cops. The stage itself rises and falls in sections, and each time people settle at a platform’s edge their upturned faces look like the dazzled faithful at a concert.

The resulting energy is electric. Miss Adelaide (Marisha Wallace) sings to a rapt sea of fans; Nathan Detroit (Daniel Mays, capering like Martin Short’s Ed Grimley) sweet-talks them when his doll gets prickly. Everything—floating craps game, marching missionary parade—must “excuse me, pardon me” its way through the milling traffic. Staging “Guys and Dolls” like a packed revival meeting rhymes with the musical’s own story: the gambler Sky Masterson (Andrew Richardson) will eventually throw in his lot with the missionaries. In this fervent atmosphere, how could he not?

There’s a certain loss, though. To compete with all those bodies moving around, the sound designer, Paul Arditti, has cranked the amplification too high, and Sky and his beloved Sarah (Celinde Schoenmaker) keep pivoting to face a different direction, never locking eyes, let alone hearts. In-the-round staging can be exciting—gladiatorial, even—but it makes it hard to illustrate intimate relationships. The issue of where to look certainly scuppered one of London’s stranger musical efforts: Ashley Robinson’s attempt to turn Ang Lee’s “Brokeback Mountain,” itself an adaptation of Annie Proulx’s short story, into a play with countrified music by Dan Gillespie Sells. Watchers sit close enough at the new @sohoplace to smell the beans that Jack (the delicate, nervy Mike Faist) and Ennis (the inward-turning Lucas Hedges) are heating over a real campfire, but the ninety-minute “just the facts, ma’am” version of their painful romance can’t show us what we really want to see: the moment the cowboys’ glances catch.

There’s more heat—though not the erotic kind—between the two men in Jack Thorne’s “The Motive and the Cue,” a quasi-historical portrait of the theatrical giants Richard Burton (Johnny Flynn) and John Gielgud (Mark Gatiss). The setting is the lead-up to a 1964 Broadway production of “Hamlet,” which was directed by Gielgud and starred the thunder-and-lightning Burton as the not so melancholy Dane. Thorne references a book by the actor Richard L. Sterne, who made recordings surreptitiously during rehearsals, but mostly he seems to borrow from William Redfield’s “Letters from an Actor,” an epistolary account of the show’s process. Redfield’s crisp, brilliant, refreshingly irritable narrative is one of the great books on performance. He played Guildenstern, a sly and listening courtier, in that production; something about the part must lend itself to existential observation. (Tom Stoppard’s “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead” was first performed in 1966.)

Unfortunately, Thorne’s additions to Redfield’s material tend to the maudlin and the tabloid. Burton, known for his drinking, is here a sometimes cruel and sloppy alcoholic. Flynn captures the weird tang of Burton’s Welsh accent, though not his gravitas; and Gatiss plays Gielgud as a figure so desperate for succor that he pays a sex worker to come to his room, where he sobs, chastely, in his arms. The director, Sam Mendes, hopes that lushness will add some dignity to the proceedings, and stages the play like a film. On the wide proscenium of the Lyttleton, black flats whip apart to reveal an all-white rehearsal hall, a ruby-red royal suite, a sapphire-blue hotel room.

Thorne translates some scenes directly from Redfield, bridging them with sequences from “Hamlet.” Shakespeare, I’ll say this for him, wrote some solid stuff. You can hear where Thorne’s own language comes in—in 1964, I don’t think people said “I got you” in the middle of an embrace. He also transforms Gielgud, who seemed so reluctant to make choices that Redfield called him a “fine thoroughbred refusing his jump,” into a wise father figure, full of secret sadness. Thorne has an obsession with father-son dysfunction: he interpolated flashbacks of Scrooge’s nasty pa into his 2017 adaptation of “A Christmas Carol”; and his Tony Award-winning “Harry Potter” play turned the Boy Who Lived into the Dad Who Neglected. Here, he has Burton finally break down while admitting that his father was a drunk and a bully, and Thorne urges us to believe that this connection to biography is a turning point for his performance. The real Burton knew his craft far better. “When I am not still, I am poor,” he told Redfield. The play’s greatest pleasures therefore come from Gatiss, who *is* still. His delicacy with the text lifts his scenes above the surrounding bathos like a kite. ◆

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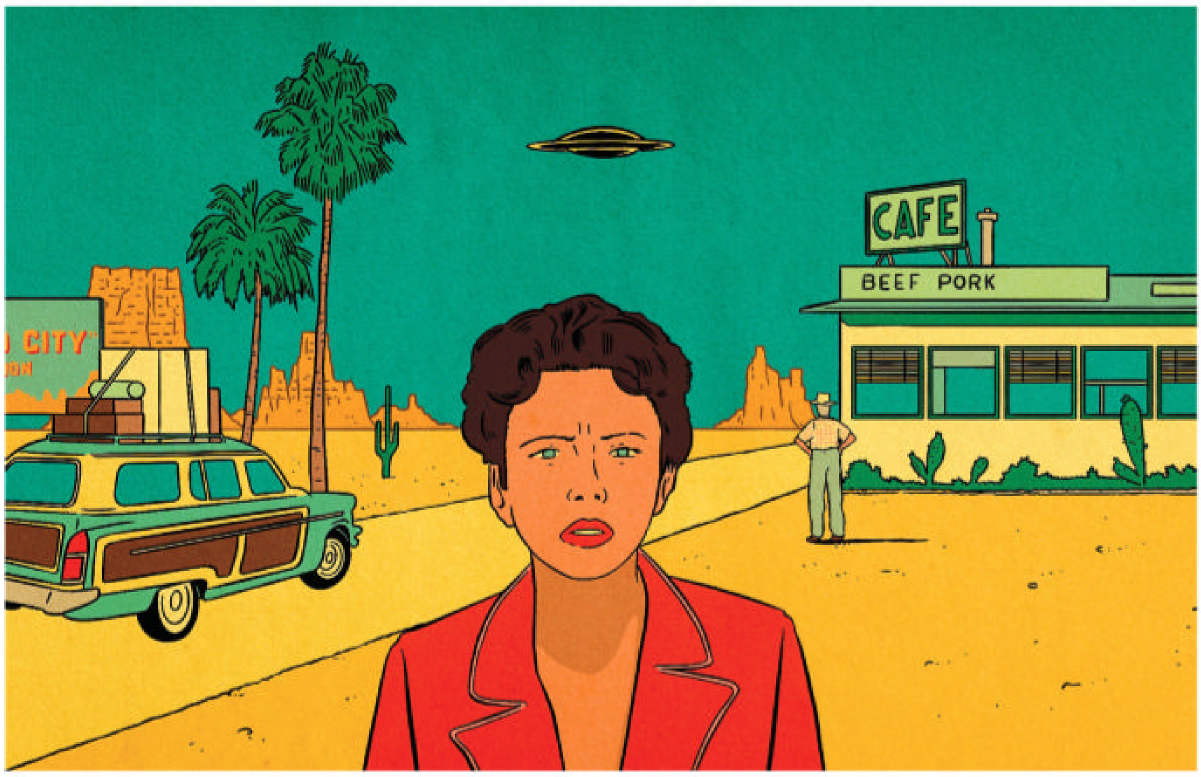
THE CURRENT CINEMA

NOWHERESVILLE

"Asteroid City" and "Maggie Moore(s)."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Like pretty much everything about the new Wes Anderson film, "Asteroid City," the title is a joke. Asteroid City is not a city but a dusty town, a stone's throw from the middle of nowhere, with a population of eighty-seven, a luncheonette, and a motel where you can get milk, Martinis, and real estate from vending machines. And what crashed in this remote spot, nearly five thousand years ago, was not an asteroid but a meteorite, the size of a crystal ball. So, who shows up here, in the course of the plot? Apart, that is, from the widower with his late wife's ashes in a Tupperware bowl, the blazing Hollywood star, the eccentric kids and their futuristic inventions (not least a functioning ray gun), the warbling cowboys, and the government agents who plunge everyone into quarantine? Nobody, really. Unless that green glow in the film's trailer turns out to be an alien spaceship, bearing someone, or something, who stops to pose for a picture. But that would be absurd.



Scarlett Johansson stars in Wes Anderson's latest film.

The year is 1955, an era when a merry mushroom cloud can billow upward, in the background, signalling the test of an atomic bomb, without causing undue alarm. The widower is Augie Steenbeck (Jason Schwartzman), a pipe-smoking war photographer. He has three little daughters, a precocious son, Woodrow (Jake Ryan), and a car that just broke down. Also staying in Asteroid City is Midge Campbell (Scarlett Johansson), a famous actress who reduces lesser mortals to mutterings of awe, and her daughter, Dinah (Grace Edwards). In a neat romantic arrangement, Dinah falls for Woodrow, with whom she shares a penchant for the extraterrestrial, while Augie loses his heart to Midge. Their courtship is largely conducted across the space between two motel cabins; this allows them to be framed in windows, as if they were stuck in their own private movies.

The framing does not end there. "Asteroid City," we learn, owes its existence to a stage play, written by Conrad Earp (Edward Norton), whose creative labors are described to us by a narrator (Bryan Cranston). How, precisely, the film locks into the play, why we first see the play on a TV monitor, and whether it's the same play that is overseen by a debonair director, Schubert Green (Adrien Brody), are narrative niceties that must await clarification from viewers much smarter than me. I was content, more or less, to sit back in dumb delight, and to savor the textural contrast between the black-and-white crispness of the theatre scenes and the powdery, sherbet-like colors, loud but never deep, in which Asteroid City is steeped. Of particular note is the aquamarine that pops up everywhere—overlaid with a pattern of pink diamonds, if you please, on the pants heroically sported by Tom Hanks, in his role as Augie's father-in-law, Stanley Zak.

The movie, believe it or not, was shot in Spain. But *can* you believe? Are those genuine roads, leading out of Asteroid City, and do they stretch to an actual horizon? The pastel flatness of the landscape, as an arena for spasms of nuttiness, is akin to that of Pixar's "Cars" saga or a Road Runner cartoon—a kinship made explicit by the roadrunner that hops in and out of sight. Beep-beep! You could try cataloguing Anderson's references to other works of art (not just films), but beware: your quest, like Wile E. Coyote's, is doomed from the start. The opening credits, during which a train hustles through the desert, pay blatant tribute to those of "Bad Day at Black Rock" (1955), the only slight kink being that Anderson's train is ferrying avocados and a nice, ripe nuclear warhead. A caution on the side reads "DO NOT DETONATE," which happens to be the title of a batch of recent screenings at the Museum of the Moving Image, devised to herald the release of "Asteroid City." The films included "Ace in the Hole" (1951), "The Misfits" (1961), and, yes, "Bad Day at Black Rock."

All of which will leave some prospective moviegoers asking, "You mean we have to do *homework*?" Others will be less concerned by what went into "Asteroid City" than by what emerges at the other end. All the characters seem to have attended Anderson School, so to speak, where the need for underreaction, clipped and quick, has been drummed into them; that would explain why Augie's young daughters barely flinch, let alone cry, when they hear of their mother's demise. Such a conceit—that emotions can be as stylized

ILLUSTRATION BY SIMON BAILLY

as clothes—is not a fault so much as a sly strategy. (You encounter it all the time in Restoration comedy.) Now and then, however, I couldn't help yearning for the tough, sombre inhabitants of "Bad Day at Black Rock": Spencer Tracy, Robert Ryan, Ernest Borgnine, and Lee Marvin. When Tracy, one-armed and clad in funereal black, strikes Borgnine and sends him reeling through the doorway of a bar, with Ryan holding steady at the pinball machine beside them, the director, John Sturges, positions his figures with Andersonian care, but there's a meaty moral tension in the fray. These guys are not fooling. Who, in "Asteroid City," can make that sort of impact?

Scarlett Johansson, that's who. In most Anderson films, someone stands out from the ensemble; remember how "The Grand Budapest Hotel" (2014) was warmed by the recklessness of Ralph Fiennes. Even if you regard the latest movie as a box of tricks, you have to admire the nerve with which Johansson, as Midge, delves into that box and plucks out scraps of coolly agonized wit. More deftly than anyone else, she traffics in the to-and-fro between the real and the imagined. Lounging in her bath, one arm flung over the rim, she's a Cold War reboot of "The Death of Marat," by Jacques-Louis David; elsewhere, she's costumed and coiffed à la Kim Novak in "Vertigo" (1958). Midge's lipstick is a shade of pale fire, sometimes paired with a black eye, which is the result not of true violence but, as she admits, a dab of greasepaint—preparation for an acting job, or a fearful sign that, soon enough, fate will take another swing at her? Casually, she mentions having known cruel men, and, when she refers to herself and Augie as "two catastrophically wounded people who don't express the depths of their pain because we don't want to," something in this orderly, scholarly, and hypervigilant movie cracks open. It's not just meteorites, or aliens, that land in Asteroid City. Humans can leave a crater, too.

Another dry land, another unregarded town, another stack of quirky folk who meet with a mystery. John Slattery's "Maggie Moore(s)," whose title might prove too fussy even for Wes Anderson, was filmed in New Mexico, and the atmosphere is parched and desperate. Jon Hamm—Slattery's comrade-in-arms from "Mad Men"—plays a police chief named Sanders. As he and his deputy, Reddy (Nick Mohammed), inspect a charred corpse in a burned-out car, the acrid nastiness catches in your throat.

As with "Asteroid City," there's a nagging sense, in "Maggie Moore(s)," of different stories being bundled into a single movie. On the one hand, we have murder most foul: two women, both named Maggie Moore (Mary Holland and Louisa Krause), are found dead, and suspicion falls on their respective husbands, Jay (Micah Stock) and Andy (Christopher Denham). On the other hand, there is circumstantial evidence of love. One of the victims has a next-door neighbor named Rita Grace (Tina Fey), who interrupts the investigation by inviting Sanders to dinner. After a couple of dates, they go to bed. She asks, "Are you ready"—pause—"for the sex?" The answer is no.

What's remarkable is the sight of Hamm and Fey, who held center stage in two of the most lauded television shows of the century, settling into this shrunken, disconsolate, and deeply unstarry tale. There was a period, running roughly from Clint Eastwood in "Rawhide" to George Clooney in "E.R.," when the small screen was considered a magic portal to the big one. To claim that the situation has been reversed, and that cinema has now become a retirement home, would be going too far, but it's noticeable, in "Maggie Moore(s)," that Hamm and Fey play people who have all but dispensed with hope, mislaying self-esteem and encouraging life to sift through their fingers like sand. One is a widower, the other a divorcée. "Losing is kind of the point," Sanders says, as he and Rita play the slots in a casino. "No, I know," she replies. "That's why I fit right in."

As you'd expect, both actors are highly adept at locating the humor in this sighing pathos. Not that the dialogue ever tightens into the snap of "30 Rock." What Slattery conjures instead, for some reason, is a continual sourness and decay, which gets into every crevice of the action; Jay, who works at a subs franchise, saves money by buying out-of-date cheese and meat, scabrous with green mold. So heavily does the movie strain for offbeat detail—a killer who watches cartoons at full blast; Jay equipped with a neck brace *and* a leaf blower—that it refreshes one's respect for Wes Anderson, whose eye for oddities remains clear and bright. By the end of "Maggie Moore(s)," I was dying for one of those instant Martinis, served by the motel machine in Asteroid City, with an orange twist. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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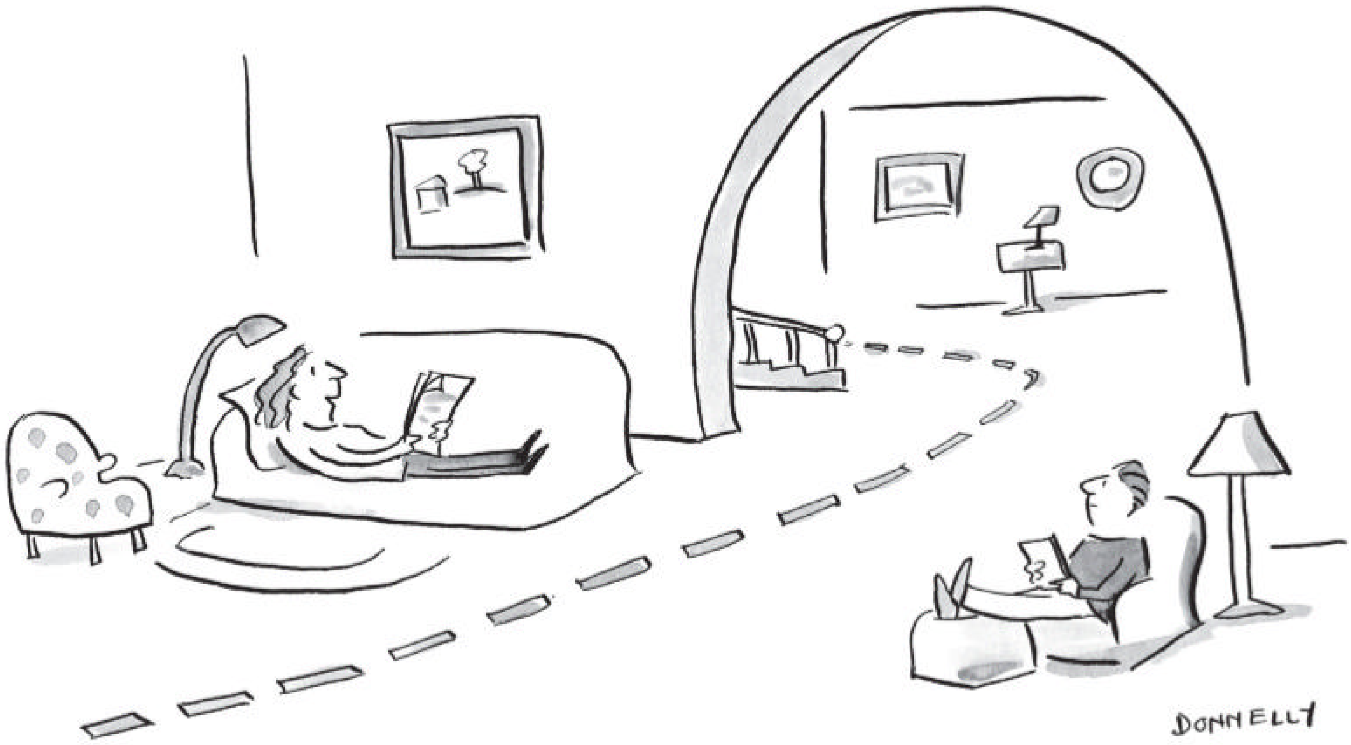
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Liza Donnelly, must be received by Sunday, June 25th. The finalists in the June 12th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the July 10th & 17th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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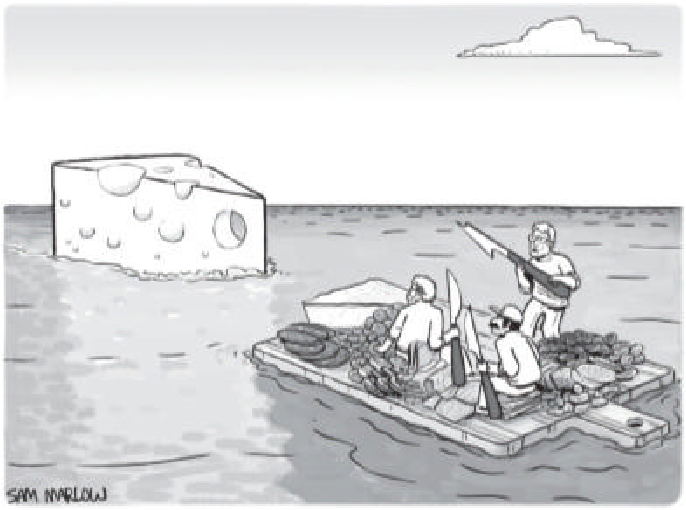
THE FINALISTS

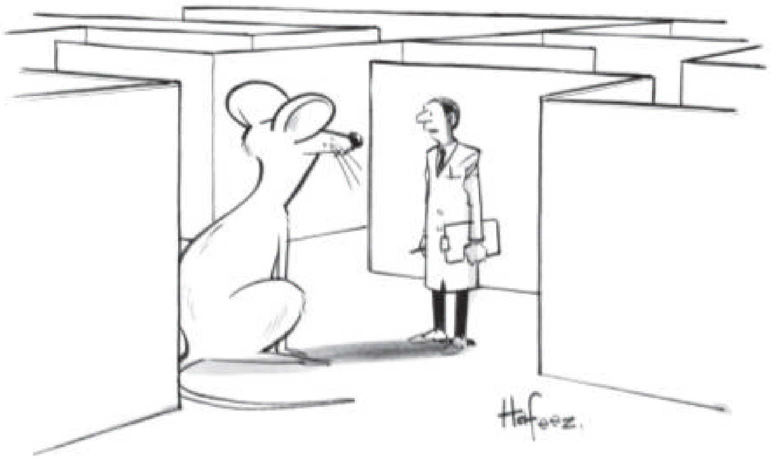


“Bland ho!”
Brandon Lawniczak, Mill Valley, Calif.

“All we need now is to find a port.”
Darren Shickle, Leeds, England

“Quick! Get the Swiss Army knife!”
Ken Mohnkern, Pittsburgh, Pa.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“It's an honor to work with a giant in the field.”
Nicole Chrolavicius, Burlington, Ont.

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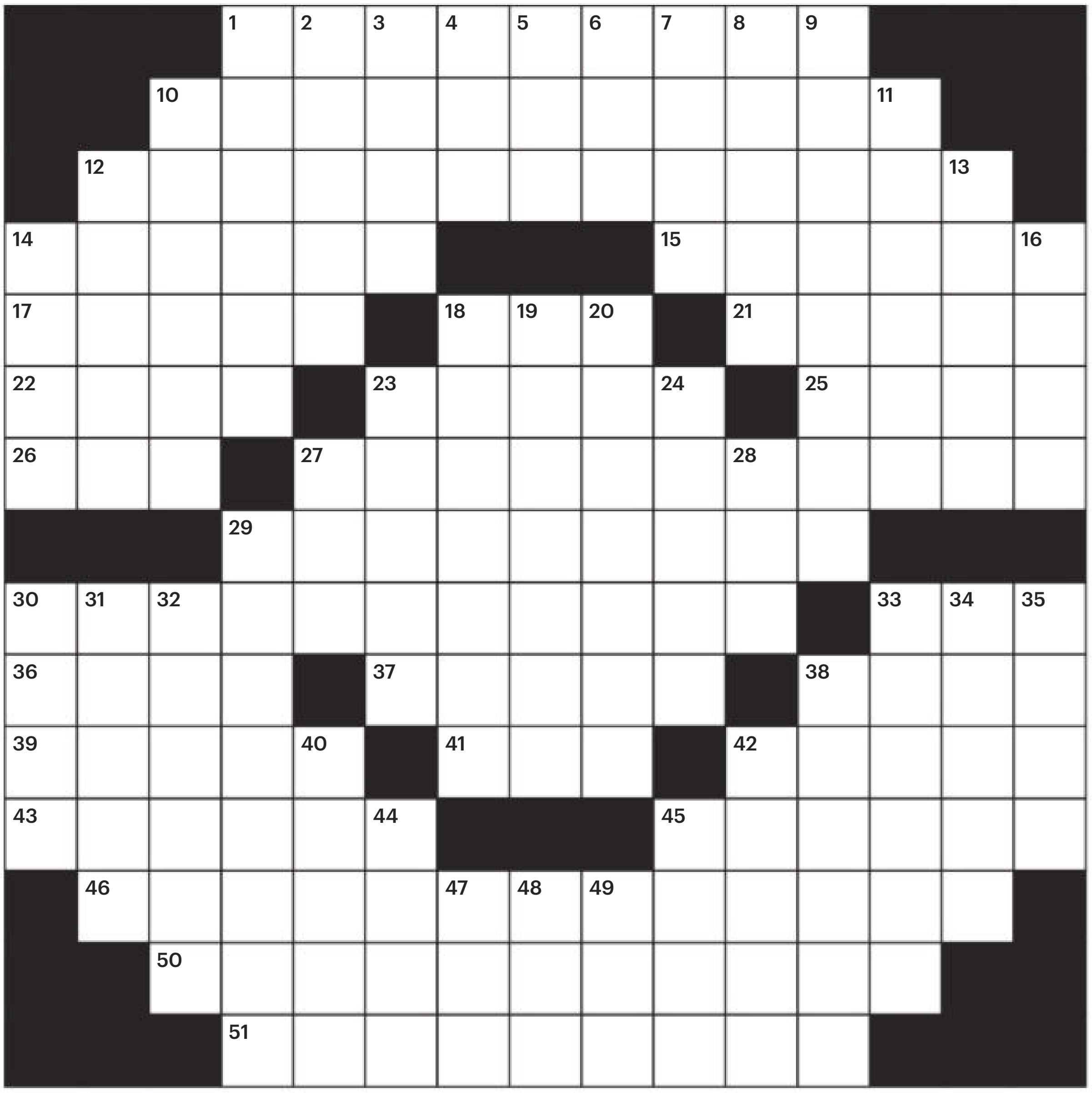
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A moderately challenging puzzle.

BY KAMERON AUSTIN COLLINS



ACROSS

1 Zero-calorie option
10 You can see right through it
12 Feeling of dread heading into a workweek
14 Prop in some period war flicks
15 ___ acid (compound that mixes with hydrochloric acid to form aqua regia)
17 New Jersey county with an English namesake
18 Bang
21 ___ pudding
22 Source of some dairy protein
23 "Stranger Things" actor McLaughlin
25 Objects
26 Cap
27 Platform that usually doesn't take a politician very far?
29 They may hold Jigglypuffs
30 Condiment also known as *salsa bandera* because it shares the colors of the Mexican flag
33 Marcille of "America's Next Top Model" and "The Real Housewives of Atlanta"
36 Back talk?
37 Helen Mirren and Judi Dench, for two
38 "That's a ___!"
39 Big name in cataloguing, once
41 Too bad
42 Obsession, maybe
43 Care for
45 Movie transitions in which the field of vision appears to expand or contract
46 Metal heads?
50 Manager of a pitching staff
51 Genre influenced by dancehall

DOWN

1 2001 role for Eddie Murphy
2 Classified section?
3 Coup d'___
4 Pop's Swift, to fans
5 Some lab installations
6 Ellipsis equivalent
7 Map
8 End of a stroke
9 Signature pairings?
10 Swore
11 "Once Upon a Time in America" director Leone
12 Hand roll, e.g.
13 Conductivity symbol
14 Whimper
16 Dermatologist's concern
18 Noble scientific subject
19 "Forrest Gump" setting
20 Got an award, perhaps
23 Became crusty
24 Figurative extras
27 Social group
28 ___ Rida (singer and rapper born in Miami Gardens)
29 Unfortunate one
30 Bother
31 Treats in red-white-and-blue cups
32 Some game rituals
33 Photoshop tool
34 Bunch vessels
35 "Escape from the Planet of the ___" (1971 film)
38 Show signs of sun exposure, perhaps
40 Archeological slab
42 Where to see "Las Meninas"
44 Eastern European name that comes from a word meaning "holy"
45 There by
47 Umami source, for short
48 Like
49 "Golly ___!"

Solution to the previous puzzle:

F	L	E	W	■	S	E	L	L	■	S	N	I	P	S
S	U	R	E	■	T	H	A	I	■	P	E	T	R	I
G	I	R	L	G	R	O	U	P	■	E	O	S	I	N
■	■	■	C	R	O	W	D	F	U	N	D	I	N	G
B	I	G	O	I	L	■	■	I	N	C	A	N	T	S
E	N	A	M	E	L	■	B	L	E	E	D	■	■	■
N	U	M	E	R	I	C	A	L	■	R	A	I	T	T
D	I	M	■	■	N	O	T	E	D	■	■	C	R	Y
S	T	A	R	R	■	P	E	R	E	N	N	I	A	L
■	■	■	A	U	R	A	S	■	S	E	A	N	C	E
S	W	A	G	B	A	G	■	■	T	I	G	G	E	R
C	A	N	D	Y	D	A	R	L	I	N	G	■	■	■
O	H	G	O	D	■	N	E	O	N	S	I	G	N	S
T	O	L	L	E	■	D	A	V	E	■	N	O	A	H
T	O	O	L	E	■	A	L	E	S	■	G	O	N	E

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at
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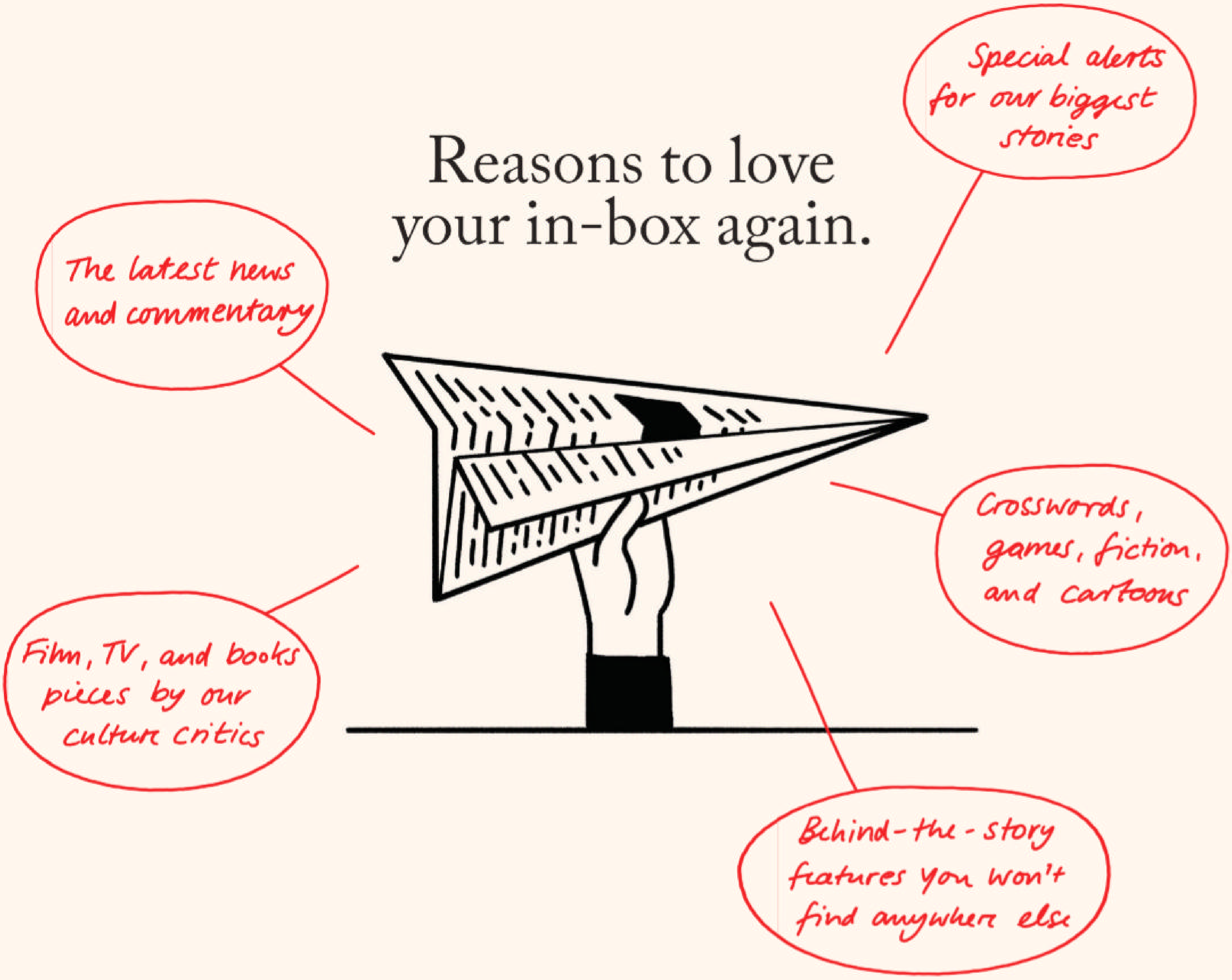
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